A Study of Subtitling From the Perspective
of Functional Equivalence Theory

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Subtitling is a form of screen translation. Due to the time and space restrictions, subtitling exhibits unique characteristics which construct the toughest obstacles for subtitlers. Nida's functional equivalence theory aims at complete naturalness of expression and tries to make the understanding and appreciation of the receptors of the translated text consistent with those of the original receptors. This paper elaborates on discussing subtitling issues from the perspective of functional equivalence theory.

Keywords: subtitling, functional equivalence, fansub groups

Introduction

International contacts, owing to the fast development of science and technology, have undergone more and more changes in daily life. One typial example is that the Internet makes foreign films, TV programs easily accessible to the general public. From *Friends* and *Prison Break* released years ago to nowadays *Reign*, *House of Cards*, *Game of Thrones*, etc., these works have not only entertained people but also promoted cultural exchanges, thus the significance of subtitling is self-evident.

As a type of audiovisual translation, subtitling has its own unique characteristics, rules, and criteria, while as a branch of literature translation, subtitling should also be informative, artistic, and popular. Some fansub groups have been coming into being on the Internet to translate the subtitles of English films and TV programs for Chinese audience. But due to different translation abilities of fansub groups, good versions are mixed up with the bad. Nida's theory of functional equivalency provides an efficient path to better subtitling with a clear and precise view on how to translate foreign films or TV programs into vivid Chinese and make subtitled ones able to strike a responsive chord in the hearts of Chinese audience.

Overview of Subtitling

Henrik Gottlieb (1992, p. 165) defines subtitling as a written, additive, immediate, synchronous, and poly-media translation. Actually, subtitling belongs to "subordinate translation" and has restrictions of time and space, which directly affect the final result. Subtitles translation does not only consist of translating the textual context, but also support viewers in the image and the audio, with determined time and space.

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Classification of Subtitling

According to Gottlieb (1992), subtitling can be linguistically divided into intra-lingual subtitling and inter-lingual subtitling. The former involves the production of subtitles that remain in the same language as the original. By transferring the words into text, intra-lingual subtitling aims at changing the mode of speaking, not the language. Obviously, it is mainly used for people who are deaf or have hearing impairment, or for language learners. The latter refers to both a change in mode and that in language on the basis of keeping original sound, going from the source language into the target language, and from spoken dialogue into a written, condensed translation which appears on the screen. Generally, subtitle translators "cross over" from interpreting the spoken foreign dialogue to presenting a written domestic-language translation on the screen. Therefore, inter-lingual subtitling keeps a diagonal feature, often called Diagonal Subtitling Translation.

Characteristics of Subtitling

Time and space restrictions. The prominent characteristic of subtitling is the restrictions of time and space, which affect and determine the quality standards and form of translation. Generally speaking, the space in subtitles should be limited to two lines, which are usually placed and centered at the bottom of the screen without interfering the image utmostly. Put it in another way, each line should not contain more than 35 characters, including any letter, symbol, or space. In terms of the limits of time, a subtitle generally has a minimum duration of a second and a maximum duration of six seconds on screen. Therefore, the subtitler must be sure that the text should be synchronized with both the image and the audio, which is also the biggest charm of subtitled films and teleplays.

Instantaneity. Subtitling is a kind of immediate translation (Gottlieb, 1992). On one hand, subtitle combined with the image makes sense, and thus helps the audience understand the plots. On the other hand, subtitles flash by, and cannot be browsed like books, so too long subtitles are out of permission for they might affect viewers' understanding and appreciation.

Colloquialism. Different from other kinds of literature, films and TV programms inspired by life pursue not only the beauty of art, but also the authenticity of life. Most dialogues in plain language make films and TV programs popular among modern viewers. Thus, subtitling should be colloquial and life-oriented with eye-catching and simple expressions.

Feasibility of Applying Functional Equivalence Theory in Subtitling

Different from the previous translation studies which focused on the discussion of the translatability of language, Eugene Nida (1969) pioneered the functional equivalence theory, according to which receptors of the translated text should understand and appreciate the translated text in the same way as the original receptors do with the text. Namely, the relationship between target receptors and the message should be substantially the same as that between the original receptors and the message. However, there are not always formal equivalents between two languages, so sometimes and in some circumstances, misunderstanding cannot be avoided (1993). Therefore, adjustments are needed wherever misunderstanding may be resulted in order to achieve functional equivalence.

In fact, Nida's functional equivalence theory has wide applications, among which subtitling is a typical one. To make translation understood and appreciated without misunderstanding is the final purpose of subtitling.

English and Chinese are two completely different languages with their own features. Therefore, during the process of translation, it is inevitable to meet obstacles where adjustments are needed based on the theory of functional equivalence, which include not only language transformation obstacles, but also cross-cultural communication problems. Translators should analyze the original text, identify and address linguistic and cultural differences between the two languages and cultures. Under the guidance of the functional equivalency theory, some specific methods are widely adopted in subtitling.

Simplification

The ultimate purpose of subtitling is to make viewers understand the essence of foreign films and teleplays, and achieve the goal of cross-cultural communication with the aid of subtitles. But due to the restrictions of subtitling proper, subtitlers prefer to use simplification and reduction to make their translation simpler and more brief and concise within the restrictions of time and space. Essencially, simplification contains reduction, through which subtitlers ommit minutiae and unimportant symbols or expressions to cater to the restrictions of time and space. Though some elements must be ommited and simplified, subtitles must always be a natural text. The ideal final result is that subtitles are synchronised with the audiovisual document, in such a way that it sounds natural and fluent, so that viewers can be absorbed in the integration of the image, the audio, and the subtitles.

Domestication and Foreignization

Domestication and foreignization are strategies in translation, regarding the degree to which translators make a text conform to the target culture. Domestication focuses on making text closely conform to the culture of the language being translated to, which may involve the loss of information from the source text, while foreignization on retaining information from the source text, and involves deliberately breaking the conventions of the target language to preserve its meaning (Venuti, 1995). Whether domesticating or foreignising in its approach, any form of audiovisual translation ultimately plays a unique role in developing both national identities and national stereotypes. The transmission of cultural values in screen translation has received very little attention in the literature and remains one of the most pressing areas of research in translation studies (Baker, 1997, p. 76). Obviously, every story in one film has something to do with its cultural norms, so whether subtitling should adopt domestication or foreignization is a question worth considering. However, from English films online, it can be noticed that subtitles translation done by fansub groups tends to be more domestic, for it is easy for viewers to catch the meanings in seconds.

Emphasis on Audience Reception

Foreign films and TV programms have a wide range of audiences in China. As other kinds of literary works, subtitled films and TV programs should also focus on audience reception. How to generate an emotional audience response from the subtitled programs? This is a tough task for subtitlers, who should have the ability to grasp viewers' eyes and always be enchanting enough to attract people's attention. Therefore, subtitling does not just switch between languages, but also creates a work of art which might be generally accepted and appreciated by the target audience. In order to do subtitling better, subtitlers should, first of all, be aware of their roles—a translator and a viewer. This requires subtitlers to think about what kind of translation can satisfy the audience's needs.

Conclusion

With the rapid growth of the movie and television industry, Chinese audience has grown an interest of watching movies or TV programs online, for it is the most convenient way. Additionally, the springing of fansub groups online indeed has spurred on the fast development of subtitling. As a kind of immediate screen translation, subtitling is indeed more difficult than other translation activities. Nida's functional equivalencetheory provides a guidance for subtitling by highlighting the functional equivalence between the original text and the target text. In fact, in the process of subtitling, there are some issues hard to tackle, especially, cultural information. Subtitlers need to be equipped with functional equivalence theory and flexible to convey the essence of the original text to the largest extent. Therefore, a careful study on subtitling is worth carrying out.

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