Subtitle Translation Strategies in Multimodal Discourse Analysis: *Love Letter* Film Case Study

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The present era is witnessing a flourishing diversity in artistic and entertainment endeavors, facilitated by technological advancements. Films combine visuals, music, and dialogue into a unified whole, and the importance of subtitle translation is also highlighted when watching foreign films. Currently, there are various approaches to the analysis and research of subtitle translation in films, among which the research method of multimodal discourse analysis is widely applied. Taking the classic Asian film *Love Letter* as an example, this paper analyzes and researches the strategies of subtitle translation in films from four perspectives: culture, context, content, and expression. By examining specific instances of subtitle translation in films, effective translation strategies can be derived, facilitating the conveyance of film content and emotional expression. This aids Chinese audiences in experiencing exotic cultural nuances.

Keywords: multimodal discourse analysis, subtitle translation, *Love Letter*, Japanese film

Introduction

The once-popular Asian youth romance film *Love Letter* is the debut feature film of Japanese director Shunji Iwai. *Love Letter* premiered in Japan on March 25, 1995, and four years later, it was first introduced to mainland China in 1999. On May 20, 2021, *Love Letter* was re-released in Chinese cinemas, demonstrating the enduring affection of Chinese audiences for this film and its status as a classic. The film tells a story about youthful memories.

Love Letter, a Japanese aesthetic movie with a fresh style and a hazy portrayal of youth, brings Chinese audiences a touching feeling in their hearts. The success of this movie is not only attributed to the director's characteristic aesthetic style, the actors' portrayal of their roles, but also the quality of the subtitle translation, which largely affects the audience's perception in the target language, and even affects our understanding of the core of the movie.

The Evolution of Subtitle Translation

Subtitling translation refers to the transcription and translation of audiovisual texts. Due to its low cost and effective results, subtitling enables rapid dissemination of audiovisual products. It also aids in second language learning and allows individuals with hearing or visual impairments to enjoy various video effects. Therefore, it is widely utilized (Wang, 2020).

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Some scholars argue that subtitling translation is a literal, visual translation that adds a new layer of content onto the original audiovisual text. Ultimately, this approach results in an augmentation rather than a reduction of the original text (Zheng, 2020). Subtitling translation possesses several characteristics: immediacy, accessibility, audibility, non-intrusiveness, and comprehensiveness (Qian, 2000). Producing high-quality subtitles for films and TV shows is not a simple task; it requires careful consideration of the characteristics of subtitle translation.

Currently, research directions in subtitling translation mainly encompass traditional translation theories like communicative translation theory, as well as studies that integrate aesthetics with subtitling translation. Subtitling translation in audiovisual texts, such as movies and TV shows, is considered a unique form of text, requiring audiences to engage both visually and auditorily. Therefore, the use of multimodal discourse analysis research methods can better highlight its effectiveness.

Overview of Multimodal Discourse Analysis Theory

Multimodal discourse analysis originates from the concept of semiotics, with Roland Barthes pioneering the notion of multimodal discourse. In his "Rhetoric of the Image" Barthes (1977) groundbreaking considered images and sounds (visual and non-verbal auditory symbols) as two modal dimensions worth exploring in multimodal meaning generation, alongside language (Wang, 2023). In the 1970s, Halliday's systemic functional linguistics provided significant linguistic groundwork for multimodal discourse analysis theory. It emphasized the role of visual, auditory, and behavioral symbols such as images, colors, sounds, and actions in discourse while analyzing linguistic features. The visual grammar proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) marked a milestone in multimodal discourse analysis. Research on multimodal discourse analysis abroad has a long history and has yielded substantial results. Chinese scholar Li Zhanzi (2003) first introduced the theory of multimodal symbols to China, leading to a gradual rise in related domestic research. However, multimodal discourse analysis achievements in China remain limited, primarily grounded in systemic functional linguistics and focused mainly on theoretical and qualitative studies.

This paper, guided by the methodology of multimodal discourse analysis, takes the film *Love Letter* as its research subject to explore the focal points and challenges of subtitle translation at different levels. It delves into the cultural connotations hidden behind subtitles and combines regional and contextual analysis, along with translation strategies, to ensure the accuracy of subtitle translation. Ultimately, it aims to build a cultural bridge for Japanese film exchange.

Translation Case Analysis

Cultural Dimension

In multimodal discourse analysis theory, each mode carries its own potential meaning, while simultaneously they collaboratively contribute to the overall meaning of the communicative discourse. Zhang Delu (2009) noted that the cultural dimension is a key aspect that enables multimodal communication, encompassing human thought patterns, philosophies of life, daily habits, and the ideologies formed by all social norms and conventions. At the cultural level, a key aspect of multimodal communication, we can perceive the exchange and collision of different cultures in foreign films and television productions. China and Japan, both belonging to East Asia, are neighboring countries with close ties. Japan has long been influenced by Confucian culture from China, and its

cultural expression tends to be introverted and restrained. However, over time, Japanese aesthetics have gradually leaned towards impermanence, emphasizing the heartfelt appreciation of life's subtle beauty, encapsulated by concepts, such as "mono no aware", "yūgen", and "wabi-sabi".

Director Shunji Iwai, blending Japanese aesthetics, has crafted his unique "Iwai aesthetic". In his film *Love Letter*, under his direction, the imagery is refreshingly beautiful, with letters serving as a constant thread throughout the film. In the 1990s, when internet technology was limited, expressing oneself through letter writing was also a symbol of Hiroko Watanabe's longing for her deceased fiancé. Over 20 years later, when the film was re-released in Chinese cinemas, internet technology in China had rapidly advanced, and many viewers had never experienced letter writing. Therefore, in translating the film subtitles, it is important to consider the varying levels of understanding among the target audience regarding different cultures, aiming for translations that are more accurate, comprehensible, and clear.

Example 1:

ST: 普段、風邪ひかない人なんだけど、ひいちゃって、これ、鬼の霍乱だねなんて笑ってたら、こじらせてとうとう肺炎。 (Normally, he hardly ever catches a cold. But this time, he caught one, jokingly called it "even the enlightened catch colds", and ended up with pneumonia after it worsened.)

TT: 他平时不生病，这次突然感冒，开始还戏称是"罗汉也生病"，结果久拖成了肺炎。

This sentence is spoken during the process of Fujii Itsuki (female) being tricked by her mother and uncle into going to see a new house, when in fact they are taking her to the hospital because she has caught a cold. Since her father died of pneumonia, she strongly resists going to the hospital for treatment. Concerned about her well-being, her mother, along with her uncle, stages a scenario. During their conversation, the uncle mentions a situation involving a client, intending to divert Itsuki's attention while also using the experience of others to remind her not to fear hospitals and to seek timely treatment when ill.

In the given example, "鬼の霍乱" is a culturally specific term in Japan. According to Daijisen, a Japanese dictionary, it refers to "a person who is usually very healthy suddenly falling ill". "霍乱" in Japanese means "heatstroke". In Japanese culture, "鬼" represents a robust figure, literally meaning "even demons get heatstroke". This metaphor is used to describe those who are typically strong and healthy suddenly falling ill. When translating this sentence, cultural differences should be taken into consideration. In Japan, there has long been a belief in the spirituality of all things, with a prevalent culture of ghosts and demons. Japanese imagination of the mysterious and unknown can be glimpsed through this culture. They consider "鬼" to be powerful and significant, one of the many spiritual beings, without strong rejection or resistance. Japanese language also includes numerous proverbs and sayings related to ghosts and demons. In China, the mention of "ghosts" typically evokes negative and fearful associations with "death" and "spirits". People often consciously avoid discussing topics or using words related to "ghosts" and "death". Therefore, considering the cultural differences in multimodal discourse analysis, in the translation process, it is essential to respect the cultural disparities of both audiences. Taking into account the cognitive differences of Chinese-speaking audiences, the translation aims to use words that quickly capture the main information and facilitate understanding. Hence, the expression "even arhats fall ill" is employed. Although "arhats" originally stems from Buddhist terminology, it has long been familiar to the Chinese populace since Buddhism's introduction and dissemination in ancient China. It refers to robust and strong individuals, aligning well with the image of robust "ghosts" in Japanese culture. Moreover, "heatstroke" and "falling ill" share similar meanings of physical discomfort, thus providing a clear correspondence.

Contextual Dimension

The contextual dimension develops further based on the cultural dimension. Zhang Delu (2009) pointed out that in specific contexts, communication is constrained by contextual factors, including the discourse scope, tone, and manner determined by the context.

Films integrate background music, visuals, and storylines into a cohesive whole. When translating subtitles, attention should be paid to the coherence of the storylines and the consistency of language expression to convey information to the audience accurately and quickly. Therefore, in the translation process, it is necessary to consider the cause-and-effect logic of the story, the intensity of background music, and the actors' facial expressions. Appropriate translation techniques should be used to avoid imbalance in meaning, allowing the target language audience to immerse themselves in the core message of the film.

Example 2:

ST: もう、ええ加減、あいつのことは自由にしたったってええんちゃうの？君も自由になれよ。(It's time to let him go in peace, right? You put it down too.)

TT: 也该让他安心地走了吧？你也放下吧。

This is spoken by Akiba when listening to Hiroko talk about sending a letter to the deceased Fujii Itsuki's hometown address. Akiba has admired Hiroko even before Fujii Itsuki's confession. After Fujii Itsuki's passing, Akiyama silently stays by Hiroko's side, wanting to help her overcome the pain of losing her beloved and hoping she can start a new life with him. However, he knows that Hiroko has not been able to forget Fujii Itsuki. With sadness and some resentment, he wants her to realize the reality that Fujii Itsuki is already gone.

Considering the contextual nuances, the translator noticed that the word "自由" might not directly resonate with the typical Chinese understanding, as it often implies freedom at a broader level, not just in personal matters. Therefore, translating it as "let him be free" would not align well with Chinese speech habits. Additionally, there's no indication in the surrounding text that Hiroko is troubled or restricted in sending letters to her deceased fiancé Translating it as "let him go peacefully" would better suit Chinese conversational norms. In both sentences, "自由" is used, but with different subjects and contexts. In the former, "あいつ" refers to Fujii Itsuki (male), who has passed away. Hence, it would not be appropriate to translate both instances of "自由" the same way. Akiba is advising Hiroko to let go of her pain and not dwell on the past. "放下" here implies releasing emotional attachment to someone, showing respect for the departed, and earnestly encouraging Hiroko to move on from her suffering.

Content Dimension

As part of the framework of multimodal discourse analysis, the content dimension is divided by Zhang Delu (2009) into two aspects. Firstly, the semantic dimension, which encompasses conceptual meaning, interpersonal meaning, and strategic meaning, constrained by the discourse scope, tone, and manner. Secondly, the formal dimension, where the characteristics of different modes interrelate to express discourse meaning. At this level, each mode has its own formal system, such as visual grammar, auditory grammar, and tactile grammar. In films, dialogue is not solely about what is said; it also utilizes visuals, background music, etc., to depict the protagonist's state of mind. These essential elements collectively form a complete work, illustrating the interconnectedness and mutual influence among different modes.

Example 3:

ST: 「こんな調子の狂ったスタートを切ってしまったあたしの中学生活は、以後もあいつのせいで不当な差別に満ち溢れた。暗い三年間になってしまったのです。」 ("My middle school life, which

began with such a crazy start, continued to be filled with unfair discrimination because of him. It became three dark years".)

TT: "我的中学如荒诞剧一般开场，之后也因为他而饱受不公平对待，度过了黑暗的三年。"

The content dimension emphasizes the meaning implicit behind discourse, conveying the underlying significance inherent in the speech. In this passage, as Fujii Itsuki (female) writes her letter, there are interspersed scenes of boys and girls wearing sailor suits and Zhongshan suits. Director Shunji Iwai is adept at using camera angles. The flashback scenes under his lens have a warm yellow tone and a slightly blurred effect, clearly distinguishing between reality and memory. The voice-over introduction makes it clear to the audience that they are about to enter a flashback. When translating subtitles for film and television, the audience's reading speed must be considered. Subtitles with a large amount of information and text need to be concise and clear while accurately conveying the message. In terms of content, utilizing visual and auditory imagery can explore the true meaning behind this sentence, translating it into concise and clear language. According to the reading habits of Chinese audiences, the subject is typically placed at the beginning of the sentence. Japanese often uses lengthy adjectival phrases.

The phrase "こんな調子の狂ったスタートを切ってしまった" serves to exaggerate and emphasize "my middle school life", highlighting the playful and adorable personality of Fujiwara Itsuki (female). The scene then transitions to two individuals with the same name and surname answering "present" on the first day of school, laying the groundwork for a series of stories related to their namesakes. It also reflects the protagonist's dissatisfaction and helplessness with the beginning of this middle school life. By combining visual and auditory elements and analyzing the characters' actions, motivations behind their speech can be accurately grasped, allowing for the translation of content that is both understandable and engaging.

Expressive Dimension

Zhang Delu (2009) pointed out that on the expressive dimension, there are language media, including "accompanying language" and "pure language", as well as non-language media, including "body" and "non-body". Subtitles translation falls under the category of written symbols in language media. Considering factors such as subtitle duration, font size and shape, and spatial layout, analysis of the film can also be done through factors, such as sound levels, character body language, and environment. Expression can showcase the characters' behavioral motivations as the plot unfolds. This helps target language audiences understand the characters' speech and grasp the storyline and underlying themes of the story.

Example 4:

ST: あの山に登る連中にあそこは危ないやの。この気候は気イつけた方がいいのとか、口やかましく言うもんやから。煙たがられてるんですわ。　(I always tell those backpackers that it's dangerous there, be cautious of the bad weather. Always nagging, they all avoid me.)

TT: 我总跟那些背包客说，哪里危险，小心坏天气。总啰里吧嗦的，他们都避我远之。

Since the passing of Fujii Itsuki (male) due to a mountain accident, Old Kaji has stayed in the mountains, looking after climbers. Feeling guilty and remorseful about his friend's unexpected death, he wants to prevent similar incidents, thus opting to assist unfamiliar climbers, safeguarding their lives. Considering Kaji's demeanor while drinking, characterized by a playful atmosphere, a translation in a light-hearted and jovial style helps viewers understand and meet the requirements of the expressive dimension. Referring to "あの山に登る連中" as "those who climb the mountain" implies climbers, and some mountain enthusiasts are commonly known as

backpackers. With his body language, it appears as if he knows every danger spot and bad weather condition, with a touch of self-deprecating humor, speculating that the backpackers probably find him nagging. This portrayal adds depth to his character, allowing viewers to grasp the sorrow and helplessness behind his actions through his words.

Conclusion

In the film *Love Letter* directed by Shunji Iwai, the classic narrative revolves around youthful memories and has garnered widespread attention from Asian film enthusiasts. Its re-release in the Chinese cinemas after many years demonstrates the enduring resonance of the movie. Throughout the film, the concept of life and death is interwoven, prompting viewers to contemplate the topic of mortality more deeply. Guided by the methodology of multimodal discourse analysis theory and supplemented with specific examples, it becomes apparent that the translation of film subtitles not only emphasizes the linguistic aspect, but also recognizes the interconnectedness among various facets. The distinguishing feature of film translation, as opposed to translating regular texts, lies in the fusion of visual and auditory elements. Considering this characteristic, adhering to the methodology of multimodal discourse analysis theory, subtitle translations should not only be accurately comprehensible to the audience but also consider effects such as subtitle size. The production of subtitles for a film is a significant undertaking, and it is hoped that under the guidance of scientific multimodal discourse analysis theory, high-quality subtitle translations can be created, contributing to cultural exchange efforts between the two countries.

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