

A Study on the Impersonal Expressions in Movie Lines and Their Dubbing Translation from the Perspective of Skopos Theory

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Keywords: Movie lines, Impersonal expressions, Vermeer's skopos theory, Dubbing translation

Abstract: A movie's literal expressions mainly consist of the movie lines, which can be considered as a discourse that should be primarily based on its language expression habits. In English the impersonal expressions are often used, while there is strictly speaking no such so-called thing in Chinese. Therefore, how to translate this sort of expressions from English to Chinese is a meaningful challenge, especially in movie dubbing translation that tends to require more native effect in the target language context. Based on Vermeer's Skopos theory, this article analyzes the dubbing translation of impersonal expressions and discusses its realization effect in the target language context.

1. Introduction

Since the subject-object dichotomy from Plato, the onefold recognition for the existence of individual action as a certain rule from Bacon, and the binarism of spiritual entity and material entity from Descartes, the Westerners has developed analytic thought and abstract thinking ability. This kind of thinking patterns determines that they tend to use the impersonal expressions with logical analysis and calm attitude to make statements, which are reflected in English. The English culture is also derived from the Aegean civilization, and influenced by the objective and abstract thought of Europe. The basic unit of English are the 26 letters without simulations of natural phenomena or specific meaning. Only when they are combined to form words can they bring certain meaning, which is quite different from Chinese. Therefore, people using this abstract language are inclined to use abstract concepts to describe something. This is also one reason why there are so many impersonal expressions in English.

The impersonal expressions in English can be narrowly regarded as those sentences with "it" as subject, while in general they can be considered as some sentences with an impersonal subject, such as an abstract noun, even some language fragments devoid of human character or traits. This kind of expressions is still a common style, especially in written language, such as official documents, news, scientific and technological works, prose, novels and other literary works, which often makes the narration appear objective and fair. What's more, its structure tends to be tight and compact, and the tone is more euphemistic as well as indirect. Among those expressions, some scholars extract a kind of statements called "inanimate subject sentences", which originates from the first use of "inanimate subject" by Zhang and Chen in their book *Comparative Study of English-Chinese Grammars*. He first used ESWIS as the abbreviation for English sentences with inanimate subjects in the abstract of his thesis. An animate noun refers to a living person, especially a name unique to human beings and human social organizations, whose actions or behaviors can be seen as inanimate verbs, such as see, kill and send. Inanimate nouns include abstract nouns and names that denoted non-living things, and inanimate verbs refers to those non-living movements or states, such as be, seem and become. The structure of ESWIS is usually summed up two patterns, inanimate subject + inanimate verb, or inanimate subject + animate verb.

The impersonal expressions in English movie lines are not as common as they in written language, but owing to the expression habit and thinking pattern, almost every movie has a few lines classified into the impersonal expressions. Moreover, the frequency of impersonal expression

varies among different movie genres. For example, the literary movies are usually full of the impersonal expressions, which help to enhance the aesthetic value. Different from the Westerners, Chinese influenced by the holistic thought believe in the intersecting web of natural, social and personal relationship, developing a kind of sense impression and intuitive thought, which is reflected in Chinese that the subjects are usually living things with specific meanings and the views or feelings are directly expressed. Therefore, how to translate those impersonal expressions from English to Chinese is a meaningful challenge, especially in movie dubbing translation that has more restrictions and more costs than subtitle translation. What's more, dubbing translation is dominated by state-owned enterprises, which represent a certain level of translation, while most subtitle translation is usually completed by some amateurs, of which the quality is unstable. So it has the certain significance to study the dubbing translation of impersonal expressions in movie lines.

2. Theoretical Basis

Skopos theory was proposed by Hans J. Vermeer in the 1980s. Prior to this, translation theory research mainly emphasized the equivalence of translation, not taking the purpose of translation as the primary consideration, but Vermeer who absorbs part of the Behavioral Theory believes that translation is a kind of transformation, also a kind of human behavior, and any behavior has its own aim or its own purpose, then any action will lead to a result, a new situation or event, possibly a new thing. This is why Vermeer calls his theory "Skopos", which comes from Greek, meaning "purpose". Associating it with translation activities, he expounds the purpose of translation into three meanings: the basic purpose of the translator during the translation process, the communicative purpose of the translation in the target language context, and the purpose of implementing the corresponding translation strategy or method. In general, the core concept of Skopos theory is that the most important factor determining the translation process is the purpose of the overall translation behavior.

The significant difference between Skopos theory and traditional equivalent translation theory is that Skopos theory pays more attention to the expected effect of the translation in the target language context, which benefits from the theoretical foundation raised by Reiss that whether the target text can be regarded as a good translation lies in whether it achieves the function of the source text. In Vermeer's theory, the source text is rarely mentioned. Unlike the traditional equivalence theory in which the source language enjoys a higher status, the target language has a higher one in the Skopos theory. He believes that the source text is only a source that provides some or all of the information for the intended audience.

In addition to emphasizing the decisive role of the purpose of the overall translation behavior in translation and paying attention to the expected effect of the translation in the target language context, Skopos theory also proposes an important principle-coherence rule. This principle of coherence is not the kind of rule mentioned in the writing, but refers to the internal consistency between the will embodied in the translation and the will of the target readers in the social and cultural environment, that is, the translation should be readable and acceptable to the receivers in target context. A translation with such conditions can be called a successful translation. Therefore, the audience has become one of the most important factors affecting the purpose of translation in Vermeer's Skopos theory framework. The intended recipients of these translations have their own cultural background knowledge, expectations for the translation and actual needs of communication. Those factors should be taken into consideration by the translator. Every kind of translation points to a certain audience, so translation is a text produced for a certain purpose and target audience in the target language context. In addition, Skopos theory has extra two principles, skopos rule and fidelity rule.

Vermeer's Skopos theory frees translation studies from the constraints of source-centrism, and expands translation evaluation from a single, text-level evaluation dimension, such as information fidelity, the equivalence of the source and the translation, to the original author, translator, and reader. The dynamic connection of the three subjects, especially the reader's acceptability of the translation. Based on this theory, translators have more degrees of freedom, and are no longer

limited by binary issues such as literal translation and free translation, foreignization and domestication, and can choose corresponding methods and strategies according to corresponding purposes in translation practice. What's more, this theory has been applied into the evaluation of audiovisual translation for many times. It has great practicability.

3. Impersonal Expressions of Movie Lines in e-C Dubbing Translation

Those examples of impersonal expressions are selected from many kinds of movie genres, including animation, action movie and classic literary movie. And their dubbing translation is completed by Shanghai Film Dubbing Studio, a professional studio that translates foreign movies and televisions. The evaluation of those dubbing translation is given from the perspective of Skopos theory, meanwhile it is also connected with the features of dubbing movies, which can be characterized as “three closeness”, close to the contexts and audience, close to the characters and emotions, as well as close to the frames and mouth shapes.

3.1 Highlighting the Personification

The impersonal expressions sometimes personify lifeless things or abstract notions, such as some English sentences that consist of inanimate subjects and animate verbs. Although in Chinese the animate verbs are usually matched with the animate subjects, this kind of match like English sentences with inanimate subjects is a figure of speech called personification. Therefore, this kind of expressions can be translated by highlighting the personification.

Example 1:

ST: Change mocks us with her beauty.

TT: 秋日用她的美嘲笑我的天真.

This example is from *Frozen 2*, a Disney animated movie. The context is that Olaf seems like a young poet who is suffering from the ever increasing complexity of thought that comes with maturity. With a maple leaf in his hand, he says that change mocks us with her beauty. In the source text, “change” is an abstract expression of seasons changing as well as time passing as an inanimate subject, and “mock” that only people can show is obviously an animate verb. So this impersonal expression is typically an ESWIS. Since Chinese prefers the concrete concepts, in the target text “change” is translated into “fall days” (秋日), which matches the frame of Olaf's holding a maple leaf very well, and the meaning of “mock” is faithfully saved. What's more, the amplification of “my innocent” (我的天真) completes the whole sentence, which is also in line with Olaf's lovable character. In terms of coherence rule from Skopos theory, those adjustments to this impersonal expression highlight the personification, make the target text smooth, then meet the audience's expression habits.

3.2 Transforming into “Topic + Comment” Structure

In English the impersonal expressions are often used, while in Chinese the “topic + comment” structure accounts for one-half of the expressions. Since the impersonal subjects are weird to Chinese expression habits, then give up the original patterns and restructure into the “topic + comment” ones.

Example 2:

ST: The function of man is to live, not to exist.

TT: 人生在世应该去生活,而不只是活着.

This example is from *007: No Time to Die*, the 25th movie in the “007” series. The context is that M makes a short speech in honor of James Bond who died in the line of duty. The central word, in grammar, is “function”, and “the function of man” is the subject of this impersonal expression, which still belongs to the abstract notion as English likes. According to the original subject and the whole sentence, the translator employs the four-character words “人生在世” as the topic and the rest as the comment. Restructuring the impersonal expression in this way both faithfully sends the original meaning and suits the target language habits very well, which is consistent with coherence

rule.

3.3 Omitting the Subjects

Following the subject-verb structure, English sentences must have a subject, while no subject is normal and acceptable for Chinese. Therefore, the subjects of impersonal expressions can be omitted and other components can be transformed in target sentence.

Example 3:

ST: Manners maketh man.

TT: 不知礼,无以立.

This example is from *Kingsman: The Secret Service*, an action movie like the “007” one. This impersonal expression comes from Old English. In the original text, “manners” is the subject and “man” is the object. But the target text does not have a subject that should be “man” according to its meaning. What’s more, the negative expression “不... 无...” restructures the original text, which can help to strengthen the tone. In view of fidelity rule, the quaint diction of the translation is faithful to the style of the source text.

Example 4:

ST: The day we stop looking, Charlie, is the day we die.

TT: 活到老”泡”到老,俗话说说的.

This example is from *Scent of a Woman*, a classic feature movie. The context is that in an upscale hotel Mr. Slade and Charlie, waiting for their drink, encounter a gorgeous lady whose nice soap-and-water feeling attracts Mr. Slade. Blind as Mr. Slade is, he is good at inferring the female by smell, so he asks Charlie about this lady to confirm his anticipation and show Charlie how to approach ladies. “The day we stop looking is the day we die”, he tells Charlie. Here what they look at is the ladies and in view of Mr. Slade’s behaviors as well as characteristics, the translator gives “泡”, a very colloquial but impressive word, as a generalization. And the target text, like a modification of “活到老学到老” which is quite a familiar saying to the target audience, omits the subject from source text. The charm of dubbing version movie is showed through the humorous and idiomatical scripts, which becomes the ideal realization effect of the translation. In terms of skopos rule, this target text meets both the communicative skopos and the charm skopos intended by dubbing translation movies.

3.4 Taking Concrete Things or Central Meanings

Although some abstract or obscure nouns may be used as the grammar core of the impersonal expressions in English, they are actually the substitution or generalization of part communicative information for the sake of neatness or cohesion, not expressing the central meanings. Since Chinese prefers the concrete, clear and picturesque diction, the translation should emphasize the communicative meaning, exposing the central meanings.

Example 5:

ST: The truth is, Charlie, that I need a guide dog to help me execute my plan.

TT: 事实上,查瑞,我需要只导盲犬帮我执行计划.

This example is also from *Scent of a Woman*. In the source text, “the truth” is an impersonal subject that is not actually the central information of this expression, and the that clause shows the communicative meaning. In the target text the original subject is changed into an adverbial “事实上” and the main communicative information emerges with I (我) as the subject. In terms of skopos rule, this adjustment serves the communicative skopos of the target text.

Example 6:

ST: The way he looked at her is the way all girls want to be looked at.

TT: 他看黛西的那种眼神是所有姑娘都渴望的.

This example is from *The Great Gatsby*, a classic literary movie. In the source text “the way” is the central word with the abstract and obscure category, while it is translated into “眼神” clear, picturesque, and full of Chinese characteristics. The impersonal notion becomes concrete. In terms

of coherence rule, the target text belongs to the authentic expression in Chinese.

3.5 Retaining the Impersonal Expressions

Although Chinese tends to use concrete and personal expressions, it does not mean that all the impersonal expressions in English must be translated into the animate ones. Firstly, the context and the style of the source text should be taken into consideration. When it comes to the literature, the impersonal expressions sometimes help to enhance the aesthetic value and literary features, which also contain the author's certain idea. If the translation of this kind of source text is natural and acceptable by retaining the impersonal expressions, the translator shouldn't change the impersonal expressions at will. In this way, it can better reflect the original characteristics of the source text, and shows the fidelity of the translation.

Example 7:

ST: Why I say to myself should those spots of lights in the firmament be inaccessible to us? Maybe we can take death to go to a star, and to die peacefully of old age would be to go there on foot.

TT: 我对自己说,为什么在苍穹中闪亮的星星总是那么遥不可及,或许只有死亡才能到达那浩瀚的星河,而 暮年的安详离世只是朝着星河的徜徉漫步.

This example is from *Loving Vincent*, the world's first oil painting style animated feature movie. The context is that Jo sends Armand a copy of Vincent's letter to her, then Armand reads those words for his father. This is the end of this movie, which gives a philosophical explanation on Vincent's death, the main line of the whole movie, and this expression is full of literary features, such as "spots of lights" and "firmament". For the impersonal diction, here is "inaccessible" and "to die peacefully of old age". Although fidelity rule means that the target text should be faithful to the target text to the utmost extent, the degree of fidelity depends on translator's understanding of the original and sponsor's skopos which here specifically means the dubbing feasibility to a large degree. Therefore, in the target text the impersonal expressions are saved by "遥不可及" and "暮年的安详离世", which are both literary and acceptable in target language, matching the story depicted in oil painted animation very well. What's more, the four-character words like "徜徉漫步" have many advantages, such as symmetry in form, understandable and vivid in content, smooth and fluent to dub in speech sounds. The translator uses four-words in dubbing translation, which helps the actor to rhythmically dub and makes the target audience enjoy impressive descriptions.

4. Conclusion

With the abstract notion and the obscure description, impersonal expressions in movie lines both show the difference in language also in thought between English and Chinese, and become the difficulties in dubbing translation that should take target context as well as voice-frame match into consideration. But Vermeer's theory frees the translators from the constraints of source text by the view that the source text is only a source which provides some or all of the information for the intended audience and the skopos, the target readers as well as the target language expression habits should be given priority in translation. Therefore, in the dubbing translation of those impersonal expressions, the translators can transform them into "topic + comment" structure or omit their original subject as well as abstract diction, while out of fidelity the translators can retaining the impersonal expressions in target text to enhance the aesthetic value and literary features. Any method and any strategy to take should be matched up with the translation skopos, which may be the communicative one to make the dubbing easy and make the audience clear or be the cohesive one to reflect the charm of dubbing version.

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