

On the Chinese-English Subtitle Translation of Five Hundred Miles from the Perspective of Skopos Theory

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Abstract: Film and television works play a significant role in cultural exchanges between countries. In recent years, more and more outstanding Chinese films and TV works have been transmitted to foreign countries and have been well received by foreign audiences, and the comedy film *Five Hundred Miles*, released during the Chinese Spring Festival in 2023, is a fantasy comedy film that has achieved widespread acclaim from audiences at home and abroad. In the process of transferring domestic films to foreign countries, subtitle translation attaches great importance. The quality of subtitle translation directly affects the understanding of the content for foreign audiences and the influence of Chinese culture in the international arena. This study analyses the Chinese-English translation of the subtitles of *Five Hundred Miles* under the guidance of the three principles of Skopos theory, so as to provide value for translators in the future translation of film subtitles.

Keywords: Skopos theory, subtitle translation, *Five Hundred Miles*, comedy film

1. Introduction

Subtitle translation is an inseparable part of the success of the fantasy comedy film *Five Hundred Miles*, which premiered in China on January 22, 2023. Subtitles provide the viewer with a better grasp on the film's audio-visual material, and thus allow them to fully appreciate its special allure. In this process, the translation acts as a bridge between people of different cultures and is also directly related to the dissemination of the film or television production [1]. Subtitle translation has attracted much attention in the academia of translation studies all over the world, and in these studies, Skopos theory has been a commonly used theoretical framework. This study chooses the subtitles from *Five Hundred Miles* in the hope that it will be useful for other translators working on Chinese-English subtitle translation and add to the existing research on Skopos theory.

2. Background

This section provides background information for both the theoretical framework of Skopos Theory and its three core rules and the characteristics of subtitle translation, building a basis for understanding and analyzing the translations of the subtitles in the later section.

2.1. Skopos Theory

“Skopos” is a word derived from the Greek “σκοπός”, which means purpose in Greek. It is an academic term coined by the linguist Hans Vermeer to refer to the “purpose of translation” [2]. Skopos theory places a major emphasis on the goal of the translation, which dictates the techniques and tactics that must be used to obtain a functionally appropriate outcome [2]. According to Paul Kussmaul, one of the founders of the German functional school of translation, Skopos theory is a approach to translation centered on Skopos rule, i.e., adhering to the purpose of translation [3]. How the target text is achieved depends on the knowledge of the target audience, its values, cultural norms, and expectations of the text. Besides, the surroundings of the target reader and the cultural background will also have an effect on the final translation. Therefore, as a translator, these factors should be taken into consideration in the translating process to make appropriate changes to the source text. The core of Skopos theory is the translation practice centered with the purpose of translation, and it proposes three major principles, namely Skopos rule, coherence rule and fidelity rule [4]. Of these three principles, Skopos rule is the most important. Coherence rule and fidelity rule are subordinate; and fidelity rule is subordinate to coherence rule [5].

It should be noted that Vermeer did not pioneer this theory; in fact, Nida had already discussed the purpose of translation in *Toward a Science of Translating*, where he proposed the principle of “dynamic equivalence” in translation, the aim of which was to make the expression of the translation completely natural; however, this idea was not generally appreciated at the time [6].

2.1.1. Skopos Rule

From the three principles in Skopos theory, the Skopos rule stands out as the most crucial. In general, translation would have a setting purpose in this process, and translators do everything possible to achieve it. However, the aim can be a temporary stage in the process of reaching a certain goal, so that there can be multiple interrelated aims belonging to different stages in the process [7]. For a translation to perform adequately according to Skopos rule, it must make sense to its target language text receptors. Different translation approaches and techniques are used for various purposes depending on the text being translated. The translator may decide not to keep all of the original material if doing so would serve the objective of the translation. Different translation strategies are needed to convey the film’s primary ideas and arouse the interest of the target audience, depending on the setting and tone of each character. In other words, the translation must achieve the function intended by the translator in the context of the target language’s usage if it is to be considered successful in accordance with the concept of purpose.

2.1.2. Coherence Rule

The second principle translators should follow in Skopos theory is coherence. The term refers to intra-linguistic coherence, which means that the translation must be internally coherent so that the target language receptors could have a better understanding on the meaning of the translation. The translator has to identify different methods of coherence and cohesion in the source language text, and meanwhile make appropriate use of cohesion in the target text to reconstruct the coherence of the source language [8]. At the same time, the translation must be accurate and make sense in the target language’s culture and the communicative situation in which it is employed..

2.1.3. Fidelity Rule

The principle of fidelity in translation has been discussed intensely in the academic world, and “fidelity” has always been the focus. The fidelity rule requires that the interlingual coherence between

the target language and the source text be maintained, i.e., the translation need to respect the artistic style of the source work, faithfully express the thoughts and inner feelings of the characters in the original text, and faithfully express the content of the source text to the receptors of the target language. In China, the famous translator Fu Yan proposed the translation criterion of “faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance” in his translation of *Evolution and Ethics* [9]. The principle of fidelity does not mean that the translation and the original text are literally identical, but rather that a certain correspondence between the two languages is sought.

2.2. Subtitle Translation

The cultural differences between East and West lead to the need to take into account the cultural backgrounds and language habits of each country in translation. The film and television industries expand with civilization, appearing on screens in various nations. Subtitles are different from literary genres that appear purely in textual form, as they are a form of art that combines sound and picture. Subtitling is the process of providing a simultaneous translation of the dialogue of a film or television drama, a special kind of language conversion, and subtitle translation has its own characteristics [10]. There are two different translation types for subtitles: intralingual and interlingual. Intralingual subtitling is the process of converting speech into text without the need for interlingual translation. Interlingual subtitling, on the other hand, is the process of translating the dialogue of the characters and the required visual information while keeping the original voice and concurrently overprinting the target language at the bottom of the image. The aim is to maximize the semantic information and help the audience to understand the storyline across the language barrier. The study will only focus on the interlingual subtitling (and henceforth subtitling).

3. A Case Study on the Chinese-English Subtitle Translation of *Five Hundred Miles* from the Perspective of Skopos Theory

Five Hundred Miles is a fantasy comedy film released in China during the Chinese New Year in 2023, and the film features many laughs with Chinese characteristics, which is one of the difficulties of subtitle translation. The subtitle translation should not merely accurately express the message of the original text, but take into account the differences in linguistic and cultural styles and the understanding levels and language habits of audiences in different countries as well. This paper will discuss and study the translation of subtitles through the principles of purpose, coherence and fidelity under Skopos theory.

3.1. Skopos Rule

According to the Skopos Theory, Skopos rule, or the rule of purpose, which states that the translation should function in the manner in which the receiver of the translation expects it to function in the context and culture of the language into which it is translated, is the guiding principle for all translation works. The whole translation process is determined by the goal of the act, i.e., the outcome defines the means. To ensure that the reader properly understands the meaning meant by the subtitles, the translator must carefully connect the meaning of the context and translate colloquially in accordance with the tone of the character and the unique circumstances.

3.1.1. Omission

Omission as a translation skill refers to leaving out a word or words from the source text. The technique could result from cultural tensions between the source language and the target language,

and the use of omission is found frequent in subtitle translations. Words that do not have target text counterparts or that can incite the receptor's enmity are left out by the translator.

Example 1:

ST: 就屁颠屁颠地跟在我后头

TT: ..., and he was running after me

In this text, the translator used omission on word “屁颠”, which is used to describe the way children walk unsteadily or bumping around, without any worries in a cute and lively way. In the source language context, it is a conventional collocation; and in the film, the phrase is a secondary message, so the omission will not affect the targeted text receptors. It follows the Skopos rule and reduce the difficulty of comprehension for the targeted audience.

Example 2:

ST: 这孩子怎么一激动话都说不出来了

TT: This kid stammers, it seems.

In this text, the translator used omission on the phrase “一激动”. There are two reasons for this omission. Firstly, the phrase “一激动就...” is a conventional collocation in Chinese, and a literal translation would lead to a long sentence, which would not be equivalent to the source language text, causing the receptors a bad viewing experience. Secondly, the biggest difference between subtitle translation and ordinary text translation lies in the video materials receptors received amid watching the subtitle. Therefore, translators always choose to omit the information that has already been given in the video, as in this case's video that the character are too excited to speak a word.

Example 3:

ST: 我六岁的时候，我们一家从东北搬到的上海，你说你喜欢上海滩，你说你是铁岭冯程程。

TT: When I was six, you were into that TV series Shanghai Bund. You were into that period show about Shanghai saying that you were like the heroine.

In this text, new background information is involved—the Chinese TV series *Shanghai Bund* and one of the characters Feng Chengcheng in it. This is undoubtedly very difficult for the targeted language audience to understand. Therefore, the translator directly removed the ambiguous information such as “铁岭冯程程” to reduce the confusion of the targeted language receptors. In addition, the translator used “heroine” instead of “Tieling Feng Chengcheng”, which conveys the feeling of the source text and fulfills the requirements of Skopos rule.

3.1.2. Cultural-loaded Words

The source language text will contain many words with specific cultural meanings that are unknown, unfamiliar or even difficult to understand and accept by the culture of the targeted readers and audiences, which raises the issue of the translation of cultural-loaded words. In China, the concept of cultural-loaded words was first introduced culture-loaded words in *Culturally Loaded Words and English Teaching* by Xu Guozhang, which attracted the attention of Chinese scholars [11]. Words with significant cultural connotations play a unique role in translation because they represent the bond between language and society. The following research materials are based on Chinese two-part allegorical saying, in which translators takes the approach of directly translating the core meaning to facilitate the understanding of the audience.

Chinese language has a large number of two-part allegorical sayings with distinctive oral qualities. The two-part metaphoric sayings circulate from person to person as a kind of oral production of the general population. As a consequence, the oral attribute is one of the characteristics of the two-part allegorical sayings.

Example 4:

ST: 蝙蝠身上插鸡毛，他算什么鸟

TT: Playing hard to get. He's got some nerves.

This two-part allegorical saying means that the bat is not a bird, but it is pretending to be one by sticking chicken feathers on its body. The phrase is a logical deduction, and the description is the result of the inference from the previous part of the metaphor. In the subtitle translation, in order to allow the target language receptors to quickly receive the information and understand the plots, the translator had made a paraphrase, using an idiom from the English language, which is not only short and in line with the characteristics of subtitle translation, but also follows the Skopos rule.

Example 5:

ST: 不要拿肥皂沫当镜子，一切成泡影

TT: keep your feet on the ground or you'll end up with nothing.

The source language text borrows a Chinese proverb to describe not being grounded, which has cultural connotations in it. In this text, the translator chooses to grasp the main idea of the idiom, leaving aside the cultural aspects, so that the targeted language receptors can better understand the plot of this film, following the Skopos rule first.

3.2. Coherence Rule

In subtitle translation, the readability and acceptability of the translation is particularly important due to the differences between Chinese and English cultures. Moreover, the punctual nature of subtitles determines that the audience are unable to check back when the content confuses them like they can do when reading a translated book [12]. As a result, it is significant for translators to present the audience with a translation that they can understand and accept. To follow this rule, amplification is often used in subtitle translations.

Amplification is the inclusion of words that are not in the original text but are actually used in the translation in accordance with the intended audience, the target language's syntactic structure, and logical linkages. It should be noted that in the case of subtitle translations, amplification is only applied when the subtitle does not compromise the aim of facilitating the receptor's understanding due to factors such as length. That is to say, none of the following examples of amplification causes exceeding length and sacrifices the readability, which indicates that the Skopos rule takes precedence over coherence rule.

Example 7:

ST: 我和我的爸爸妈妈，奶奶妹妹生活在弄堂里

TT: I live with my parents my grandma and sister in a Shanghai alleyway.

“弄堂” is a unique form of dwelling in Shanghai, Jiangsu and Zhejiang regions. It is an alleyway made up of rows of old houses, embodying the urban culture of contemporary Shanghai and fostering a distinctive alleyway culture in all of its manifestations. As a cultural-loaded word, the translator chose to add the contextual information “Shanghai” in the targeted text so that the targeted language receptors could better accept Chinese culture. In addition, other information about Shanghai is also mentioned before and after the film, using the additional translation to complete the information to achieve a more coherent effect.

Example 8:

ST: 我爸因为你买了 穿了好几年呢子大衣

TT: So, my dad tried to look like the hero by wearing a woolen overcoat for years.

The amplification of “look like the hero” adds an exact reason for wearing a woolen overcoat, rather than simply translating it as “because of you”. This amplification forms an anaphoric relation with the plot of “heroine” before, making the text more coherent. Meanwhile it still follows the Skopos rule as its length does not lead to confusions of the audience even with the addition.

Example 9:

ST: 找那个挨千刀的去

TT: Go find your loser of a daddy

The phrase “挨千刀” means a person who can’t get rid of his hatred even after a thousand cuts, usually being used when a wife scolding her husband. In the text, translators translated it into “your loser of a daddy”, where the word “loser” expresses the wife’s complaint against her husband, and the amplification of “daddy” makes the character relations more complete and coherent for the targeted language receptors.

Example 10:

ST: 你要不出去的话我告诉你，我就报警 报警

TT: Leave now or I swear to God, I’m calling the police!!!

In this text, the translator adds the phrase “I swear to God”, opting for the theory of domestication, giving priority to the targeted language receptors. This amplification appropriately captures the emotion of the source text and translating it into the idiomatic expressions in targeted language. Not only does it follow the Skopos rule, but it is also coherent.

3.3. Fidelity Rule

The fidelity rule states that the translation should be loyal to the source language text, or there should be interlingual coherence between the two. Nevertheless, the degree and format of faithfulness to the source language text depends on the objective of the translation and the translator’s comprehension. The translator can employ specific approaches and translation strategies while translating subtitles to ensure that the translation is coherent and true to the original material. It should be pointed out that, as already mentioned in 2.1.3, the rule of fidelity is subordinate to the rules of Skopos and coherence, which means that fidelity is only considered when both Skopos and coherence are satisfied.

3.3.1. Literal Translation

A literal translation is a method that maintains both the content and the form of the source language text. The translation is often used in the same form of expression as the original to reflect the same content and to produce the same effect. In the examples from this study, a literal translation is easy to understand for the audience as well, which presents Skopos rule. Additionally, the targeted text using literal translation is smooth, which shows the coherence rule. As a result, it indicates that Skopos rule and coherence rule have priority over the principle of fidelity.

Example 11:

ST: 绝对有面

TT: Give you enough face.

In recent years, some Chinese expressions have been gradually accepted in English-speaking countries, such as “long time no see”, and so is the translation of “face” here. The expression “give someone face”, which is a translation from Cantonese and is most often used in regard to Chinese people, culture, and commerce, implies to demonstrate or treat someone with respect, honor, and dignity. Using English phrases with Chinese characteristics in subtitle translations follows the Skopos rule in the first place and shows coherence and fidelity as well. It also spreads Chinese culture in film and television productions, increasing the use of Chinese phrases in subtitle translation.

Example 12:

ST: 为啥你每次当众发言都呃呃呃的呢?

TT: Why does your public speaking never go beyond er er er?

In this text, the translator retains “er er er” directly, which on the one hand shows the translator’s fidelity to the source language, and on the other hand preserves the comic character and allows the targeted language readers to get a laugh.

3.3.2. Translation Mistakes

Example 13:

ST: 我外头有一亿姐妹，还有一车面包人。

TT: I’ve got plenty of women and plenty of power.

However, there are still some problems with the current subtitle translations. In the above text, for example, the source language expresses the hilarity of the character saying the wrong thing because of his anxiety. The qualifier and the modified object are mismatched; the translator directly ignores this feature and translates the source text into a meaning without any laugh, failing to meet Skopos rule and the principle of fidelity.

4. Conclusion

This study analyses the Chinese-English subtitle translation of *Five Hundred Miles* under the perspective of Skopos theory. The Analysis of these materials shows straightforwardly the significant role played by the three principles of Skopos theory. In order to better convey the meaning of the film and television to the audience and enable them to better comprehend the content, translators should clarify the purpose of translation prior to translating and choose the corresponding translation strategies according to different translation purposes, taking into account the characteristics of subtitles, language habits, and cultural differences between Chinese and Western cultures.

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