

A Case Study of the Subtitle of Yao-Chinese Folktales: From the Perspective of Multimodal Discourse Analysis

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Abstract: With the rapid development of information today, people's way of communication has undergone tremendous changes. Language is no longer the only way for people to communicate. From the perspective of social semiotics, language symbols in the process of meaning construction no longer occupy an absolute dominant position. Images, sounds, gestures, animation, color, and other non-verbal social symbols in the ideogram process play an important role. Thus, the isolated study of a sign mode can not explain the full meaning of the discourse. It is in this context that multimodal discourse analysis emerged. Film or television works are not only pure texts but also contain color, music, performance, etc., which make the multimodal characteristics more obvious and constitute the multimodal discourse of subtitle translation. Therefore, studying subtitle translation from the perspective of multimodality could evaluate the quality of translation in a more comprehensive way. Starting from this perspective, this paper applies Zhang Delu's theoretical framework of multimodal discourse analysis to analyze the subtitle translation of *Yao-Chinese Folktales* from four dimensions: culture, context, content, and expression, to understand the influence of multimodal on subtitle translation.

Keywords: multimodal discourse analysis, multimodality, subtitle translation, Yao-Chinese folktales

1. Introduction

In recent years, various Chinese films with the theme of Chinese traditional culture have gradually attracted people's attention and have been widely praised by Chinese audiences. Also, accurate subtitle translation has become an important factor, allowing westerners to accept Chinese films. Film translation plays an extremely significant role in promoting cross-cultural exchanges between Chinese and western cultures. The animation *Yao-Chinese Folktales* has eight episodes. It is nothing like one of that continuous cartoons. In fact, eight episodes of cartoons tell eight independent stories. Some stories borrow from ancient novels, while others adapt from ancient legends. For instance, the first episode called *Nobody* appears characters from *Journey to the West* created by Ming dynasty writer Wu Cheng'en; The second episode *Goose Mountain* is adapted from the ghost novel "Goose Cage Scholar" written by Wu Jun, a writer of the Northern and Southern Dynasties. Since the

animated film *Yao-Chinese Folktales* was officially released on a Chinese video website on January 1st, 2023, it has been widely discussed. Meanwhile, a lot of positive comments are given to this animation. As of February 15, 2023, *Yao-Chinese Folktales* has reached 220 million views, and 79,000 people have rated *Yao-Chinese Folktales* on the platform. It received a positive rating of 9.9 out of 10.

This paper will take the animation *Yao-Chinese Folktales* as the analysis object, focusing on the translation of various culture-loaded words that appear in the film. The comprehensive theoretical framework of multimodal discourse analysis was first proposed by Chinese scholar Zhang Delu in 2009. He pointed out that multimodal discourse analysis can start from the cultural dimension, context dimension, content dimension, and expression dimension [1]. Since its introduction, many Chinese scholars have used this comprehensive theoretical framework to research film and television bilingual subtitling [2-7]. This paper will also use this theoretical framework to analyze the bilingual subtitles of the cartoon *Yao-Chinese Folktales*.

A lot of researchers have carried out an analysis on *The Wandering Earth*, *The Lion King*, and *Forrest Gump* under the framework of multimodal discourse analysis [8-10]. There are little references study the subtitles about *Yao-Chinese Folktales*. This paper focuses on this to find out how to translate this kind of animation better and promote them to the foreign audience. In the following parts of this paper, the authors will analyze the subtitles and titles in this animation from the framework of multimodal discourse analysis theory and try to give some illuminating ideas for future audiovisual translation research.

2. Methodology

The authors will mainly use the case analysis approach to discuss the titles and subtitles, analyze the translation strategies through the English and Chinese subtitles, and also consider the movie itself, for example, the combination of images and subtitles. In 1880, Harvard University made the initial suggestion for the case analysis approach, which was thereafter used in classroom teaching. Subsequently, it was widely utilized in business, education, research, and other fields [11]. Many researchers [12-17] have investigated a lot on discourse analysis since it was proposed by Harris [18]. However, people gradually found that examining discourse only from a language perspective was no longer able to adapt to the growth of media. With the development of new technologies, different kinds of media are emerging, for instance, movies, and television programs. O'Halloran also pointed out that multimodal discourse is an emerging paradigm in discourse studies [19]. According to Feng, Zhang & O'Halloran, the complex medium made up of, for example, language, image, and sound progressively replaced the single language medium [20]. Based on that, since the 1990s, some researchers have started paying more attention to multimodal discourse analysis. Systemic functional linguistics is one of the approaches to multimodal discourse analysis. In his book *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, published in 1994, Halliday, who stands for systemic functional linguistics, laid the theoretical basis for it [21]. Li is considered the very first Chinese linguist that brings the theory of multimodal discourse to China [22]. Zhang proposes a comprehensive theoretical framework for multimodal discourse analysis [1]. Li, Zhang, and Huang & Mo [8,23,24] adapt Zhang's [1] framework to analyze bilingual subtitles in specific films. Feng, Zhang & O'Halloran mainly focus on the combination of disciplines from different perspectives of multimodal research as well as the development of science and technology and the progress of the multimodal research approach [20]. Zhu mentions its theoretical basis and research approaches. He believes that multimodal discourse analysis can help people overcome the limitations of discourse analysis [25].

3. Analysis

3.1. Cultural Dimension

Chinese traditional culture has very distinctive features, such as long-lasting as well as broad and profound. How to express the cultural content correctly and clearly with Chinese characteristics contained in subtitles is one of the issues that a translator needs to consider. Many Chinese scholars mention that the cultural dimension is an indispensable part of multimodal discourse analysis [23,2,4]. Chen believes that the most challenging aspect of translating movie subtitles is the cultural information [26]. Therefore, translators not only need to master the cultural characteristics of China but also have a basic understanding of the culture of the English-speaking country. When doing translation work, translators should pay attention to the differences between Chinese and western cultures, so that foreign audiences can better understand the special meaning contained in Chinese culture, and it will also help to promote Chinese culture going to the stage of the world. However, it is noteworthy that cultural differences sometimes will cause incorrectness in conveying the original meaning of the text during translation even though the translator knows mutual cultures well. This is what is called cultural untranslatability. According to Mohammadi & Keshavarzi, the term "cultural untranslatability" describes the challenges associated with a translation that results from the difference between the source culture and the destination culture [27]. Catford believes that the cause of cultural untranslatability is that the target culture lacks contextual elements linked to the function of the source text [28]. The cultural patterns and traits displayed vary since each nation has a diverse regional setting and a different origin in terms of the culture [29]. Tian points out that the inability to translate a part of the cultural content is due to the variances in numerous areas, for example, the regional setting and different origins, which are mentioned above [30]. In certain circumstances, for instance, the first example of the next paragraph, the translator will never be able to use literal translation to express the exact meaning of the original subtitles. Thus, the translator needs to think of a way to show the implied meaning of them.

Example 1:

Original subtitles: 不要节外生枝。

English subtitles: Remember! Don't make any new trouble.

The corresponding scene is when the bear monster asks the little monster, the leading character, to go to the city to buy the seasoning needed for cooking Tang Monk. He is afraid that something will go wrong, so he tells the little monster: “不要节外生枝！”. It is a traditional Chinese idiom. If it is translated literally, the audience who cannot read Chinese may not understand. Its original meaning is that branches grow where they should not be. It is a metaphor for the emergence of new problems on the actual problem, which obstacles the problem from being solved smoothly. It is often used in a derogatory context. The subtitle translates it as that don't make any new trouble, which is a good way to let the target audience understand the meaning of this sentence. However, translating the subtitles back into Chinese is not to create new troubles. It is a bit simple and may not be able to convey the meaning of the original language well. “不要节外生枝！” can be translated as “let sleeping dogs lie” in English, so here it can be translated as “Don't make any new trouble! Just let sleeping dogs lie.” Idioms in English are added so as to achieve the corresponding effect.

Example 2:

Original subtitles:你跟着大王好好干，争取早日修炼成精。

English subtitles: You should work hard with the king and strive to become excellent as soon as possible!

In this context, when the main character, a little monster, goes back home, his mom encourages him to keep up the good work under the leadership of the king of the monster. The translator interprets

the Chinese phrase “成精” as become excellent. According to a Chinese dictionary, “成精” means that animals become monsters or someone has outstanding performance. In Chinese culture, it is believed that animals will somehow become human beings. Some animals will turn to be monsters in the shape of human beings. However, in this context, since the main character is already a monster, “成精” refers to becoming excellent. Due to the immediacy of subtitles translation, the translator does not explain the long story of “成精” but just simply conveys the implied meaning of the original text.

3.2. Content Dimension

Zhang states that meaning and form are two aspects of the content dimension [1]. The aspect of meaning refers to discourse meaning [8]. According to Zhang's [1] comprehensive framework for multimodal discourse analysis, discourse meaning includes conceptual, interpersonal, and contextual meanings. Li maintains that the meaning aspect focuses on whether the translator comprehends the meaning conveyed by various modalities. She also makes the point that the component of form largely examines the forms and various modes the translator combines to create meaning [31].

Translators should consider one of the characteristics of subtitle translation which is immediacy. This requires the translator to make the translated text as concise as possible, to remove the audience's understanding barriers to film and television content so that the audience can better focus on the content itself.

Example 3:

Original subtitles: 白山黑水，濯我红心；林下含芝，授汝长生；不见来去，胡不归去。

English subtitles: White mountain and black Water, washing my innocent heart.

Fairy mushroom grows under a tree, giving you eternal life.

The way cannot be seen, why won't I go back?

Movie subtitle translation presents unique challenges compared to general literary translation because of its immediacy, popularity, and synchronization [32]. It will be difficult for the audience to catch up when foreign words or rare words are frequently used in the subtitles.

From an overall perspective, the whole sentence is written in a classical Chinese way. Since the grammar and word choices of classical Chinese are different from what is used now, it can be challenging for modern Chinese people to read classical Chinese without difficulty. According to Huang, readers of classical Chinese require exceptional word association and logical reasoning skills [33]. Thus, for those who want to translate classical Chinese into English or other languages, advanced proficiency in classical Chinese is essential.

The first clause, “白山黑水” represents Changbai Mountain and Heilongjiang River in Northeast China. Changbai Mountain lies in the east of Jilin, Liaoning, and Heilongjiang provinces. It is the highest peak in Northeast China. Heilongjiang River is China's third longest river. “白山黑水” literally means white mountain and black water, as translated in the show. There are roads and trees in the mountain covered with snow in the show. Thus, combining what can be seen on screen, rather than using Changbai Mountain and Heilongjiang River, which are mainly Chinese pinyin, to explain “白山黑水”, the use of literal translation can be considered as reasonable. Literal translation matches what is shown to the audience. It is helpful for the audience to understand the content.

For the second clause, “芝” means glossy Ganoderma. Ancient people believe that after eating this kind of rare mushroom, people can never die. According to traditional Chinese medicine, glossy Ganoderma can be helpful for coughing and asthma. Even today, it is still considered a kind of very precious Chinese medicinal material. Since Ganoderma is a rare word, it is proper as well as understandable to describe it as a fairy mushroom. It also indicates that glossy Ganoderma has a magical effect.

For the third clause, it is a rhetorical question. In classical Chinese, “胡” equals “为什么” in modern Chinese, meaning why. The translators correctly understand the real meaning of this clause and interpret it as a rhetorical question. Its implied meaning is to express the sadness of the destruction of the forest.

Example 4:

Original subtitles: -吃了么您? -炸酱面, 省事。

English subtitles: -What's for dinner? -Noodles with meat sauce. Quick and easy.

This is a short dialogue. The dialogue shows the greetings of the neighbors in daily life, and also contains the unique food culture and pleasantries in China. The translator uses a few simple words to express the meaning of the source language dialogue as much as possible. 炸酱面 translates as noodles with meat sauce. 省事 means that the noodles are very convenient and simple to make, and it also means that the noodles can be eaten quickly.

Example 5:

Original subtitles: 小满, 来。

English subtitles: Xiaoman, take a sip.

Xiaoman is frightened by the big snake and falls ill. Xiaoman's mother comes to feed Xiaoman medicine. At this time, the scene of Xiaoman's mother holding a bowl, sitting on the bedside, and feeding Xiaoman medicine with a spoon appeared in the picture. Xiaoman's mother wants Xiaoman to open her mouth. Then, she uses a simple word 来. The translator translates it into take a sip, which accurately expresses the meaning of her mother. Subtitles and pictures together constitute a discourse meaning.

Example 6:

Original subtitles: 报! 一千只箭已经做完。

English subtitles: Sir! A thousand arrows have been made.

In this context, the king assigns a task for the little monsters to make a thousand arrows, and then some little monsters come to report that the task has been completed. In ancient times, when subordinates wanted to report new information to superiors, the subordinates would say “报” in a loud voice, aiming to attract the superiors' attention. It is believed that it shows respect to the superiors. It can be considered a kind of vocative which is a phrase used to address a specific person in an utterance [34]. Thus, the translator translates the character of “报” as “Sir!” rather than literally translating it into “Report!” or “News!”, which sounds natural to foreigners.

3.3. Context Dimension

The aim of multimodal discourse analysis is to convey the communicative meaning. In some TV series, many dialogues in daily life are concise but contain a lot of connotations and meanings. Therefore, during translation, translators are supposed to consider the specific context so as to deliver the integrated meaning expressed by characters.

Example 7:

Original subtitles: 有玩游戏这劲头, 你小子早找着对象了是不是。一天到晚让你妈这么操心, 见姑娘就问。

English subtitles: If you put as much effort into looking for a girlfriend as playing video games, you'd have met someone by now. Your mother's so worried and asks every girl she meets if they're single.

In this context, the old man is chatting with his son, persuading him out of being obsessed with computer games and into seeking a girlfriend. The old man hopes that his son could concern about her and let her bother with his marriage less. In the original subtitle, the exact question his mother

asked when she met girls is not mentioned. But according to the context and the common knowledge, it can be inferred that the question is about whether the girl is single. In the English subtitle, the translator completes the content with the translation technique of addition, enabling the audience to understand easily. In the Beijing dialect, there are a lot of phrases like “是不是”, which convey a low degree of questioning even no at all. In the view of the quality of discourse, “是不是” signifies the known information from speakers [35]. So in the animation, the phrase highlights the opinion of finding a companion. Besides, in the original subtitle, in order to unfold the worry of the youth’s mother, the phrase “一天到晚” is used to express her degree of concern, which literally means from the morning to the night. In the English subtitle, it is translated as “so”, which fits the communication convention of English users.

3.4. Expression Dimension

From a multi-modal perspective, subtitles, as written symbols, combine the sound symbols and story scenes in TV series to convey emotional meaning and connotation to the audience. Through the choice of tense, voice, words, etc., combined with the specific context and visual changes on the screen, expressing the emotions contained in the characters' discourse is an important part of the multimodal discourse theory in translation practice.

Example 8:

Original subtitles: 虎子乖, 听话阿

English subtitles: Hu Zi, keep cool and follow instructions.

In this context, Hu Zi is a pet dog of the leading character’s family. Its nose is injured. The character’s mom is going to apply for medicine on its nose. She wants the dog to be obedient.

“乖” and “听话” are commonly used when Chinese parents want their children to do something. These two expressions literally mean good boy/girl and do as someone is told separately. It is worth mentioning that “听话” can be used in an imperative or persuasive way. Thus, “听话” can be translated in different ways. For example, the child disobeys the rules and keeps making a loud noise in a cinema. Parents may angrily say “听话! 别发出声音! (Do as you are told! Never make noise again!)” In this context, parents mean to order the child in an authoritative way. Another example is the child wants a toy very much. However, parents do not want to buy it. Parents may say “听话啦, 我们下次再买吧。”(Be good, okay? We may buy it next time.) Okay is added to weaken the tone of voice. A similar situation can be found in this show. The leading character’s mom is persuading the dog to keep still so as to apply medicine for it. Thus, in the circumstance, “听话” is used in a persuasive way. To ease the tone of voice, the translators add the phrase keep cool and translate “听话” as following instructions.

Example 9:

Original subtitles: 哎呦, 您那些破烂儿就别要了, 该扔扔。

English subtitles: Forget all your old junk. Just throw everything out!

In this context, the son calls up his father to hurry to move to the new house, but the father says he is not ready to pack his trap yet. The son complains that his dad stores a large number of useless things which makes it difficult to collect and tells his father to throw them away. He expresses his complaint and impatience implicitly. Therefore, the translator does not use the euphemism but two imperative clauses which should have not been used when talking to the elder, so as to show the son’s anxiety. The phrase “该扔扔” literally means “throw the junk that you don’t need anymore. If the phrase is translated as “just throw everything out”, it can reflect the son’s impatience and scorn for “the junk”. Meanwhile, the adverb “just” strengthens the emotion.

4. Conclusions

The multimodal discourse framework is used to analyze subtitle translation in Chinese animation of *Yao-Chinese Folktales* from four perspectives which include culture, content, context, and expression. In this animation, various culture-loaded words are demonstrated to the audience using the target language, leading them to learn about Chinese stories, Chinese culture, and Chinese society, which is conducive to Chinese traditional culture spreading. Meanwhile, there are still drawbacks in subtitle translation of *Yao-Chinese Folktales*. It is not accurate enough to use the translation strategy of domestication to translate the content and emotions in daily talks. It needs more elaboration so that the target language users can understand more about the connotative meaning. The framework research is suitable to the features of mass media and it is believed that the research will help Chinese animation spread worldwide.

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