

Dynamic Contextual Adaptation in Subtitle Translation: A Case Study of *Red Cliff**

WENG Min-ya

Ningbo Dahongying University, Ningbo, China

Film subtitle translation, as a special kind of translation, has become a new area for translation studies and attracted attentions of translation researchers in different countries. Taking the film *Red Cliff* (2008) directed by John Woo as a case study, this paper attempts to explore the implication and function of dynamic contextual adaptation on the film subtitling methods on the basis of adaptation theory advanced by Jef Verschueren. It tries to prove that high-quality subtitles can be produced only when translators take technical, linguistic, and textual constraints of subtitles along with the cultural differences between Chinese and English into full consideration, and make flexible choices on subtitling methods by continuously adapting to target cultural contexts. By making a contrast between Chinese and English, the author analyzes the subtitling of *Red Cliff* from cultural contexts. Through the analysis of the subtitles of *Red Cliff*, some subtitling methods are suggested. These subtitling methods are conducive to producing excellent film subtitles which will help viewers understand film better.

Keywords: film subtitle translation, adaptation theory, dynamic contextual adaptation, linguistic context, cultural context

Introduction

It is commonly accepted that translators mediate between two linguistic and cultural systems and need not only a bilingual ability but a bi-cultural vision as well. “Translators mediate between cultures (including ideologies, moral systems and socio-cultural structures), seeking to overcome those incompatibilities which stand in the way of transfer of meaning” (Hatim & Mason, 1990, p. 3). It is no easy job to find the equivalent words in another language due to different cultural backgrounds, because implied cultural information of one language cannot be fully conveyed in the translation accordingly.

Audiovisual media products, such as films and TV programs, witness a wide spread all over the world. In particular, the film serves as a bridge for cultural exchanges and transferring customs, social values, personal ideologies, etc.. Therefore, the viewers can get a great deal of information about the outside world. Moreover, the film provides people with an effective way for entertaining.

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WENG Min-ya, teaching assistant at School of Humanities, Ningbo Dahongying University.

Film subtitle translation is a quite common way to overcome the barriers of cultures in the process of communication. QIAN Shao-chang (2000) has expressed that “Although the number of audience of dubbed films is larger than that of literary works, scholars in the translation field attach less importance to film translation than literary translation” (p. 61). Therefore, film subtitle translation should be given due attention to by researchers. Proper subtitles are accurately timed, and can convey concisely the author’s intention in a way as close as possible to the original one. In subtitles translation, any misinterpretation of cultural information will pose a great barrier to successful communication. Therefore, a subtitler is supposed to adapt to cultural context to figure out the appropriate meaning and let the viewers easily get the correct message that film has conveyed.

Dynamic Contextual Adaptation and Subtitle Translation

Dynamic contextual adaptation is the core of the process of language use in adaptation theory proposed by Verschueren. The process of language used by people is made under various degrees of consciousness based on the language itself and extra-linguistic factor, i.e., context and structure. From a pragmatic point of view, pragmatics focuses on the interadaptability of context and structure in the course of actual language use (Verschueren, 2000, p. 147). The dynamic adaptation is involved in language use when linguistic choice that has been made will enter into the context.

Above all, “contextual correlates and structural objects of adaptability are constantly interacting in the dynamic generation of meaning” (Verschueren, 2000, p. 150). Based on the relationship between context and structure, the dynamic process of generating meaning is actually carried out in social and cultural contexts. Therefore, dynamic context adaptation plays an important role in describing the process of inter-adaptation and the meaningful function of language in the language use. It can be adopted to conduct complicated translation activities. It is also true with the study on subtitle translation which has cross-cultural functions and its unique constraints.

Subtitle translation, with space, time, and textual constraints, is a unique form of translation, so the complicated linguistic structures should be avoided in the course of subtitling. Complete explanation on special terms is not allowed, because it will make subtitles too long and cost viewers much time to read. What is more, subtitle translation is a process of shifting from screen dialogues to the written forms. According to LI (2001), main task for the subtitler is to present the gist of dialogues with necessary message and let the viewers go through them in the time available. So the subtitler endeavors to reproduce concise subtitles with accurate meaning (LI, 2001).

According to the characteristics of multimedia and presence of pictures, the translator needs to take semiotic and pragmatic elements into consideration (Remael, 2001, p. 17). Therefore, more attention needs to be paid to the context while analyzing film subtitling on the basis of pragmatics. Dynamic adaptation to the context in subtitling contributes to the concise target subtitles with correct meaning, because both linguistic and non-linguistic factors need to be taken into account.

An optimal target subtitle should be reproduced by adapting to the specific context on the screen or in other background information. All in all, adaptation theory provides subtitle translation with a very useful perspective and is conducive to constructing a systematic and coherent framework so as to improve the quality of subtitles.

Dynamic Adaptation to the Cultural Context in Subtitle Translation of *Red Cliff* (2008)

Red Cliff, adapted from the Chinese masterpiece *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (1973), is the most expensive movie made in China which is directed by John Woo. *Red Cliff* is a period film containing two parts: *Red Cliff Part I* in 2008 and *Red Cliff Part II* in 2009.

Subtitle translation of *Red Cliff*, done by Geoffrey Collin Sledge, is intended to bridge the gap between China and Western countries in the light of culture and history. A Chinese film which can get so many viewers overseas and gain its own position in such a competitive market depends on its subtitle translation to a certain extent. The subtitler attempts to translate Chinese subtitle into genuine and natural English to help make the TL (target language) viewers have the closest experience as Chinese do.

The cultural context, originally proposed by Bornislaw Malinowski, refers to the social conventions and the customs of a society. Lefevere (1992) further defined the concept of cultural context “objects, concepts, and customs belonging to the world that was familiar to the writer of the original” (p. 35). QI (1992) deemed that culture comprises three ingredients: (1) material culture; (2) culture of systems and conventions; and (3) spiritual culture.

Adaptation to Material Culture

According to QI Yu-cun, material culture is represented by the various man-made material objects, such as architecture, clothing, food, necessities, tool, and so on. In *Red Cliff*, there appear several symbols of material culture with Chinese characteristics. The subtitles are required to choose appropriate methods to adapt to cultural context.

First, when the army of ZHOU Yu set off for fighting with CAO Cao, SUN Shang-xiang, SUN Quan’s sister, brings “汤圆” to them. Nowadays, Western viewers are familiar with the Chinese traditional food “饺子 (dumpling)”, but not with “汤圆”. “汤圆” is another kind of Chinese traditional food for celebrating the Lantern Festival, a Chinese traditional festival symbolizing the family reunion. With the method of *paraphrase*, the translation of “sweet rice dumpling” shows the taste and ingredient of “汤圆”. It is translated based on the knowledge of “dumpling” which has been widely accepted by most foreigners. This method demonstrates that subtitler adapts to the Chinese unique food culture and hopes that more and more foreign viewers are becoming familiar with it as well as its traditional festival.

Second, in *Red Cliff II*, there is a scene that many soldiers are playing with a ball which is called “Cu Ju (蹴鞠)”. “Cu Ju” is the former form of “football”, and it started during the Shang Dynasty (1600B.C.-1046B.C.) in ancient China. Having originally been designed for military training, the game began to be played more widely during the Han Dynasty (202B.C.-202A.C.). It was often played within the imperial palace. The subtitler chooses the method of *transliteration*, adding fresh cultural element and satisfying target viewers’ curiosity towards ancient Chinese culture. Meanwhile, with the help of synchronous image, the target viewers can further understand it.

Adaptation to Institutional Culture

Institutional culture, i.e., culture of systems and conventions, as stated by QI Yu-cun, is represented by the social norms and principles abided by people, including systems, laws and regulations, and their relevant facilities and customary habits. In most cases, Chinese and English have their own institutional cultures, therefore, when translating subtitles carrying this kind of culture, the subtitler should be adaptable to TL culture in order to show understandable and readable subtitles to target viewers.

Institutional culture can be divided into four categories in this film, i.e., historical figures and geographical names, appellation term, religious system, and temporal and spatial references.

Historical Figures and Geographical Names

In the film, the translation of some historical figures and places should be adaptable in order that the TL viewers can quickly get the meaning of the film. In most cases, the subtitler will adopt *transliteration* when translating the names of people or places, it is also true with the situation in *Red Cliff*. Nevertheless, film subtitle translation is quite different from literary translation as the former has its own limitations. Therefore, a subtitler should make appropriate adaptation in subtitling according to the specific context in the film (see Example 1).

Example (1) 曹操某将：华佗大夫，怎么了？

Doctor, what's the matter?

HUA Tuo (华佗), a renowned Chinese physician during the Eastern Han Dynasty and Three Kingdoms Period. But in the film, HUA Tuo is actually not an important character, so the subtitler renders “华佗大夫” into “doctor” so as to save the viewers’ effort to dwell on the identity of “华佗”. Here, *deletion* is an appropriate method in accordance with the linguistic context.

Example (2) 周瑜：我们东吴不是袁绍，不怕他来。

But, we men of Wu are not *cowards* and we are not afraid.

In the Battle of Guandu (官渡之战), CAO Cao cut off the noses of a thousand prisoners of war and returned them, which instantly crushed the morale of his opponent—YUAN Shao (袁绍). It embodies the timid nature of YUAN Shao. Therefore, the subtitler gets the point of ZHOU Yu’s utterance, and chooses “cowards” to specify the image and characteristic of YUAN Shao. Here, the subtitler adopts *specification* to explain clearly to the TL viewers, thus saving their time on figuring out who is “袁绍” (see Example 2).

Geographical names in ancient China are different from those in modern society. They make no sense to the TL viewers, thus the method of *transliteration* is not suitable. The subtitler makes adaptation to the specific context while rendering these geographical names (see Examples 3-4).

Example (3) 汉帝：诏，丞相曹操，亲率天子之兵，平定荆楚、吴越。

I hereby decree that Prime Minister Cao Cao be commissioned as the Commander of the Imperial Army and go forth to pacify the *South*.

Example (4) 周瑜：它出生在荆楚，就该有个荆楚的名字。

He was born in the *southland*, so he could have a *Southern* name.

“荆” is the old name for “楚”，“荆楚” refers to the area in Hunan and Hubei Provinces in China today, while “吴越” refers to the Jiangsu and Zhejiang Provinces today. It makes no sense to explain these places clearly which are of minor importance for TL viewers to know the development of the plot. Thus, the subtitler adopts *generalization* and renders “荆楚” and “吴越” into “the South”, giving the viewers general geographical direction where CAO Cao will pacify.

Appellation Term

Each society, ancient or modern, has its unique characters, thus having different forms of appellation. Appellation terms in *Red Cliff* embody the complicated personal relationship and hierarchical system in the ancient society.

For example, “丞相” is a kind of official title appearing frequently in this film. It is first set in the Period of Warring States (475B.C.-221B.C.) and set as an official in the highest rank who assists the ruler in governing a country. The translation version of “丞相” is “Prime Minister or Your Highness”. “Prime Minister” refers to the official head of a cabinet or ministry, especially, the chief executive of a parliamentary government. “Your Highness” refers to the quality of being high title used in speaking to or of a member of the royal member. Although the meanings of these words are slightly different from each other, the roles they have played in their own cultural background are the same. The subtitler makes adaptable choice to let the target viewers understand the plot based on the view of culture. The method he used is called *corresponding*.

The translation versions of other official titles in the film are listed below: (1) 陛下—Your Majesty; (2) 都督—Your Honor or Viceroy; (3) 主公—My Lord; (4) 千夫长—battalion commander; (5) 太中大夫—senator; and (6) 军师—Chief strategist.

All these ancient Chinese official titles are rendered into their similar counterparts in the Western countries to achieve functional equivalence, which is also called “cultural equivalence” (Newmark, 2001, p. 99).

It is also true with the translation of kinship terms in the film. Chinese kinship terms are more complicated and richer than those in English. Chinese people lay emphasis on seniority in the family or clan, therefore there are a lot of kinship terms which may pose a barrier to the comprehension of the meaning. In order to make the terms understandable to foreign viewers, the subtitler renders the terms in the film, such as “大哥”, “二哥”, and “三弟” into “brother” so that English kinship terms can be easily accepted. Besides, when ZHOU Yu (周瑜) calls ZHANG Fei (张飞) “张三爷”, it is rendered into “General Zhang”, the title with surname. The subtitler chooses the method of *specification* lest the viewers might not figure out who the speaker really refers to.

Temporal and Spatial References

The difference in the concepts of time and space between Chinese and English requires the subtitler to make adaptation in choice-making process. Moreover, many ancient temporal and spatial references are different from those today (see Example 5).

Example (5) 诸葛亮：老百姓行动缓慢，我想起码还要两个时辰才能撤走。

The peasants are moving slowly, it looks like they will need at least another *four hours*.

Shi Chen (时辰) is a timing unit in ancient China when a day was divided into 12 Shi Chen (时辰) and each Shi Chen equals to two hours today. Target viewers, of course, have no idea of the original subtitle and only know the modern timing unit, namely, hour, minute, and second. In order to adapt to concept of modern timing unit, “时辰” should be *converted* to “小时 (hour)” to help the viewers understand the subtitles.

Adaptation to Mental Culture

Mental culture includes the concept of value, thought patterns, aesthetic standards, morality, etc.. In this part, aesthetic standard in *Red Cliff* is analyzed only. Chinese and English appreciate different aesthetic standards, i.e., the beauty of the image and style. With the influence of the philosophical perception of the harmony, it is a belief that Chinese people consider the nature and the human being as a harmonious unity, therefore, the beauty of balance is always required in the Chinese language.

The formation of some Chinese four-character compounds embodies aesthetic value of the Chinese language and language users are always keeping balance of these compounds. These four-character compounds

are usually made up of two coordinating phrases with the same meaning. On the other hand, English sentences tend to observe the principle of “clarity, brevity and sincerity”. In *Red Cliff*, this kind of expressions can be found (see Example 6).

Example (6) 曹操：要不是臣等扫荡逆贼，当今之世，不知已有几人称孤，几人称王？

I wonder, to this day, if I had not eliminated the traitors, *how many more would claim the throne for themselves?*

In ancient China, “孤” and “王” bear actually the same meaning, namely, “the emperor”. In some cases, they can even be put together, i.e., “孤王”. CAO Cao used two synonyms to stress that others would have taken the emperor’s throne long ago without his help. In order to save time and space, the subtitler tends to *condense* the synonyms into one which is “claim the throne for themselves”.

Example (7) 诸葛亮：怎能投降给曹操？终身羞耻，颜面何存？

How could he surrender to CAO Cao? That would be *an unbearable shame*.

In Example 7, ZHUGE Liang went to Wu and attempted to persuade SUN Quan to form an alliance with them. ZHUGE Liang said that LIU Bei will not surrender to CAO Cao; if so, he will be quite shameful. Two phrases “终身羞耻” and “颜面何存” are actually two synonyms which mean that someone is quite shameful. In Chinese subtitles, it is common that two similar phrases in one sentence play a role of emphasis. Nevertheless, for the sake of adapting to the principle of conciseness in English, the subtitler *condenses* them into “an unbearable shame”.

Adaptation of Idioms and Classical Allusions

On account of the background of *Red Cliff*, there are many idioms and allusions uttered by characters. Idioms are the groups of words and phrases “established by usage as having a meaning not deducible from those of the individual words” (Pearsall, 2003, p. 908). On the other hand, an allusion is defined as “an implicit reference, perhaps to another work of literature or art, to a person or an event” (Cuddon, 1991, p. 29). As a particular kind of language, allusions have long been cherished as the national heritage. They not only make the language richer, but also make the communication much more vivid and easier.

Because of different backgrounds, the subtitler has to recognize those allusions and decide how to reproduce them in the TL subtitles. Sometimes literal translation does not work when target viewers are less familiar with history or culture of source language. Therefore, it is necessary for subtitlers to choose other suitable methods when doing subtitle translation (see Example 8).

Example (8) 曹军某臣：这两个人是墙头草，风吹两边倒……

These two men are *untrustworthy*.

“墙头草，风吹两边倒” is a two-part allegorical saying and can be literally translated into “the grass on the top of a wall sways with wind”. It describes those who have no independent judgments and stand on shaky ground. It also refers to the unreliable person. But the above-mentioned version takes a lot of space as well as time for viewers to understand. Therefore, the subtitler adopts *reductive paraphrase*. One word “untrustworthy” can well convey the essence of this saying.

Example (9) 诸葛亮：这次如果连江南都征服了，必篡汉称帝。

那么降曹不就等于助纣为虐。

If he conquers the Southland, he will surely usurp the throne.

If we surrender to CAO Cao, then we could be *aiding a tyrant*.

In Example 9, “助纣为虐” is a Chinese idiom. “纣” was a peremptory and cruel emperor of Shang Dynasty (1600B.C.-1046B.C.) in Chinese history. It is from an allusion recorded in SIMA Qian (司马迁)’s *The Record of the Grand Historian* (《史记·留侯世家》). It describes that when LIU Bang (刘邦) entered Xianyang (咸阳), he wanted to settle down and had the luxurious life. ZHANG Liang (张良) advised him not doing so by saying “jin shi ru qin, ji an qi le, ci suo wei zhu jie wei nüe (今始入秦, 即安其乐, 此所谓助桀为虐)”. LIU Bang followed his advice because he considered it reasonable, then he left Xianyang. Now, the idiom “助纣为虐” refers to “help a tyrant to do evil”. Here, the subtitler adopts the method of *reductive paraphrase* to refine the classical allusion.

Example (10) 周瑜：我们绝不允许有害群之马。

The Wu army does not tolerate *looting*!

In Example 10, the utterance is made by ZHOU Yu after he found who had stolen the buffalo in the rice fields. In fact, ZHOU Yu meant that stealing was not allowed in the army. Therefore, the subtitler changes the original concept into a more *specific* word “looting”, saving the foreign viewers much time in the interpretation of the original sentence. Furthermore, the author finds it quite advisable to render “害群之马” into “a black sheep” which is equivalent in English allusions. Moreover, this version is shorter and saves much space on the screen. So the method of *corresponding* is also accessible, it makes target viewers quickly get the point with English equivalent.

Conclusions

This paper conducts a research on subtitle translation from the perspective of dynamic contextual adaptation with the Chinese film *Red Cliff* as a case study. The study has demonstrated that subtitle translation is a process of dynamic contextual adaptation in which the subtitler continuously makes cultural choices to reproduce the connotative meaning and cultural background of the original subtitles. It has also been proved that context plays a crucial role to figure out subtitling methods and dynamic contextual adaptation does work on the process of subtitling. On the basis of the different cultural contexts between Chinese and English, subtitlers are constantly making flexible and appropriate adaptation to create good target subtitles. Moreover, some feasible subtitling methods are proposed. For the adaptation of cultural context, the methods of transliteration, deletion, generalization, corresponding, specification, corresponding, condensation, and reductive paraphrase are quite applicable. To sum up, the methods of reductive paraphrase, deletion, and condensation are widely acceptable in subtitling, and others are essential, too.

In terms of dynamic contextual adaptation, subtitle translation is indeed a process of subtitler’s continuous linguistic choice-making. On the other hand, subtitle translation takes linguistic, cultural, and other contexts into consideration. Therefore, only when the subtitler takes context into fully account and makes proper adaptation can subtitles of high quality and smooth intercultural communication be guaranteed. Thanks to the guidance of dynamic contextual adaptation, the application of subtitling methods can be quite flexible but accurate to interpret the deep meaning of the film. Furthermore, the TL subtitles are more coherent.

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