

A Study of Subtitle Translation in *Shawshank Redemption* Under Register Theory

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Language is a tool for people to communicate. Translators adopt different registers in distinct situational contexts. In this paper, based on the register theory proposed by M. A. K Halliday, the two Chinese versions of the movie *Shawshank Redemption* are analyzed respectively from the three variables of register: field, tenor, and mode.

Keywords: register theory, subtitle translation, *Shawshank Redemption*

Introduction

Since the reform and opening-up policy, Chinese are fond of watching English movies. A good subtitle translation will enhance the quality of intercultural communication and lessen the risk of intercultural conflict.

There are many factors, however, determining the quality of subtitle translation. In *Systematic Function Grammar*, the authors (Hu, Zhu, & Zhang, 1992) maintained that social environments or social contexts have effects on language. In this paper, the register theory will be systematically applied to analyze and study the subtitle translation of *Shawshank Redemption*, an American movie. The authors analyzed the subtitle translation based on register theory, which has three main dimensions of variation, that is, field, mode, and tenor.

Register Theory

Register is a form of language used for a particular purpose or in a particular social setting. Or, register can be deemed as a set of features of speech or writing characteristic of a particular type of linguistic activity or a particular group when engaging in it (Matthews, 1997).

Field

Halliday believes that field or field of discourse refers to “what is happening, to the nature of the social action that is taking place: What is it that participants are engaged in, in which the language figures as some essential component” (Halliday & Hasan, 2012, pp. 9-12). According to Gregory (1978, p. 28), it is “the linguistic reflection of the purposive role of the language user in the situation in which text has occurred”.

Tenor

By M. A. K Halliday, tenor refers to “who is taking part, to the nature of participants, their statuses and

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roles". He also points out that

what kinds of role relationship to be obtained among the participants, including permanent and temporary relationships of one kind or another, both the types of speech role that they are taking on in the dialogue and the whole cluster of socially significant relationships in which they are involved. (Halliday & Hasan, 2012, pp. 9-12)

Mode

In Halliday's opinion, mode refers to

what role the language is playing, the functions of the language that the participants are expecting in a specific situation and symbolic organization of the text, including the channel (spoken or written) and the rhetorical mode; what kind of function the text is achieved, it is persuasive, expository, or didactic. (Halliday, 1985, p. 12)

Studies on the Subtitling Translation Abroad and at Home

The Western countries' researches on audiovisual translation started early and have achieved much. Since the 90s of last century, audiovisual translation studies have entered into the "Golden Age".

In China, audiovisual translation research has a short history. These phenomena have promoted vigorous subtitling translation in China. Some domestic scholars even view audiovisual translation with prejudice. As the scholar Newmark (2001) has said: "English snobbery puts literary translation on a pedestal and regards other translation as hackwork, or less important, or easier" (pp. 5-6).

All in all, the translators at home and abroad still have a long way to go.

Analysis of Subtitling Translation in *Shawshank Redemption*

The movie, *Shawshank Redemption*, is about an "innocent man in prison". Hope is the movie's theme, setting people free.

Based on Halliday's register theory, three variables—field, mode, and tenor will be applied respectively to subtitle translation selected from *Shawshank Redemption*. When analyzing field of the movie, the authors selected two crucial factors, that is, conversation environment and monologist. However, the authors considered the length of paper, monologue, the most representative factor, only be chosen to analyze.

Analysis of Subtitling Under Field—Monologue

In the movie, the monologue is the character's speech, having special utilization. The monologue can express more precisely the inner emotions of movie characters who have deep psychological activity.

Example 1:

Red: I have to remind myself that some birds **aren't meant to** be caged. Their feathers are just **too bright**...

Chinese version 1:

瑞德：令我感伤，有的鸟**毕竟**是关不住的，他们的羽翼**太光辉**了...

(<http://www.YYeTs.net>)

Chinese version 2:

瑞德：我不得不这样安慰自己，有些鸟儿是**不应该**关在笼子里的，他们的羽毛**太丰满**

Field: This excerpt is the Red's monologue about Andy. After Andy has escaped from Shawshank Prison, Red receives a letter from Andy where he knows Andy is safe now and heads for his dream place being in the Pacific.

Red's monologue sublimates the film's theme. And the hero's character is expressed more clearly, that is, Andy is lofty. Because the monologue appears in the end of the movie, it is crucial to show the profound theme of the movie. Red's monologue implies that justice will be served as long as you does not lose hope and strive for it. For the movie, viewers felt the same feeling as the character; the translator should consider the field of the movie. The Chinese adverb “毕竟” is added for strengthening the tone, which expresses Red's exclamation. That “their feathers are just so bright” is translated into “太光辉了” in Version 1 and “太丰润” in Version 2. Compared with Version 1, “太丰润” is better, for “丰” means “growing full-fledged” and “润” refers to the bright color of the feather. It not only depicts the bright color of the bird's feathers but also the full-fledged of the bird. The bird is a metaphor in this monologue to highlight that the hero, Andy, has justice and freedom. Through the translation, the audience can gain an insight into the inner feeling of the monologist.

Analysis of Subtitling Under Tenor—Social Roles of Communicators

In the movie, dialogues contain the major role in conveying meaning, so it is significant for translators to analyze subtitle translation from the perspective of tenor.

To some extent, register is determined by the different users. Different social roles are played in communication. Therefore, social roles of communicators and social status are critical factors in analyzing the tenor of subtitle. However, according to the length of paper, only social roles of communicators are chosen to analyze the subtitle by the author.

Example 2:

District Attorney: Mr. Dufresne, describe the **confrontation** you had with your wife the night she was **murdered**.

Chinese version 1:

美国地方检察官：杜弗伦先生，请你描述**命案**当晚和妻子**争吵**的情形 (<http://www.YYeTs.net>)

Chinese version 2:

美国地方检察官：杜弗伦先生，请描述一下你妻子**遇害**当晚，你们发生**冲突**的情形

Tenor: The district attorney and Andy

The place where the dialogue happens is in the court. The dialogue characters are the district attorney and the criminal suspect, Andy. The attorney queries Andy about the confrontation with his wife and, at the night, she was murdered. The district attorney who represents the justice of the law is a solemn job in the court. Under the social role, when translating attorney's words, translators should adopt formal and professional dictions. Two distinct translations are produced by translators. Considering the tenor of discourse, the Version 1 is more faithful to reproduce the original expressions and scene, especially in wording. In Version 1, “murdered” is translated into “命案”, a professional legal terms in Chinese, conforming to the conventional expressions of a court attorney. However, in Version 2, “遇害” has personal subjective emotion not according with the diction of an attorney who should use an objective legal parlance. In the dictionary, the word “confrontation” is defined as a situation in which there is an angry disagreement between people or groups who have different opinions (Hornby, 2009). That “confrontation” is translated into “争吵” in Version 1, however, “冲突” in Version 2. Considering the social roles of the speaker, “争吵” is more appropriate to the translation. Because “争吵” is a spoken Chinese, it conforms to the situation in which Andy had verbal argument with wife in daily life. But, “冲突” is more abstract

and extensive which does not accord with the diction of Andy whose social role is husband.

Analysis of Subtitling Under Mode—Spontaneous Spoken Language

Based on register theory, mode includes spontaneous spoken language and written language. The spontaneous spoken language is a distinct characteristic of the conversation. Using spoken language as the example, the author thought the spontaneous spoken language is more representative than written language to express the effects of mode on subtitle translation in this movie.

Example 3:

Prison guard: **You going to see any of that?**

...

Prison guard: **That's great! That's like winning the sweepstakes. Isn't it?**

Chinese version 1:

狱警：天哪！一百万你能得多少？

...

狱警：哦，这真太棒了 简直就是中彩了，你说是不是？

Chinese version 2:

狱警：有你一份吗？

...

狱警：简直像中乐透嘛 (<http://www.YYeTs.net>)

Mode: Spoken language.

This is a conversation between two prison guards, characterized by spontaneous spoken languages which have the spur-of-the-moment language and contain modal particles in the English and Chinese versions. Contrasting with “简直像中乐透嘛” in Version 2, in Version 1, “天哪！” is an intense modal particle. “That's great! That's like winning the sweepstakes. Isn't it?” is translated into “哦，这真太棒了，简直就是中彩了，你说是不是？” which accords with the features of spontaneous spoken language in English. The translator added the modal particle “哦，这太棒了” into the source text, enhancing the emotional expressions in context.

Conclusion

The theme of the movie, *Shawshank Redemption*, is about hope and justice. This paper has studied the subtitle translation of the movie under register theory. The criteria that judging the quality of subtitle translation and its effects on movie viewers can be made on basis of register. Not literal translation but liberal translation can reproduce the original texts to the target readers.

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