

# A Study of Subtitle Translation Under the Guidance of the Interpretive Theory—A Case Study of *Casablanca*

ZHANG Xiaoyi, NI Jincheng

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

The interpretive theory, also named as the theory of sense, was born at the Ecole Supérieure des Interpreters and Translators (ESIT). By breaking free from the sentence patterns of the original text, the translation can be faithful to the original meaning and reproduce the expression style of the original text. It is an interpretation of the original meanings by the translator through language signs and cognitive supplements of the translator's experiences. What translator should produce is not the imitation of linguistic units, but the equivalence of the original meaning. The subtitle translation is different from the traditional translation practice. As a special kind of translation field, its task is to translate the lines spoken by the roles into a written form, which combines characteristics of both interpreting and translation. Therefore, this paper chooses the interpretive theory as the guiding theory of subtitle translation, the subtitles in the classic movie *Casablanca* as a study case, aiming to conclude that some useful translation strategies are to be used to improve the quality of subtitle translation.

*Keywords:* subtitle translation, the interpretive theory, *Casablanca*

## Introduction

According to Nedergaard-Larsen (1993), subtitle translation is a special translation of language, because it is a condensed written translation of spoken language. Therefore, the selection of its guiding theory should not be limited to translation theories. Theories of interpretation may provide more guiding significance. The interpretive theory emphasizes the principle that the task of the translator is to translate meanings, instead of conveying language signs. This theory holds that translation is interpretation, that is, the translator reproduces the meaning of the text by comprehension, de-verbalization, then combines language expression with cognition, and finally reproduces the meaning of the text with the proper expression of the target language. Therefore, this paper attempts to use the interpretive theory to guide its application and conclude some useful strategies for future practice.

## An Overview of the Interpretive Theory

The College of Ecole Supérieure des Interpreters and Translators in Paris is the research center of the interpretive theory. Lederer and Seleskovitch (1984) wrote a book named *Interpréter Pour Traduire*. This tutorial illustrates the comprehension and expression process of translation by linguistics, logistics, and

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ZHANG Xiaoyi, Master, grad student, College of foreign languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

NI Jincheng, Ph.D., professor, College of foreign languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

psychology, comparing the similarities and differences between interpretation and translation. Lederer (1994) accomplished another work, *La Traduction Aujourd'hui, le Modèle Interprétatif*, giving a comprehensive theoretical explanation of the interpretive theory. In 2001, this book was translated by Liu Heping and published in China.

With the development of the interpretive theory, translators gradually applied it to written translation as well. This application has promoted the research and practice in translation. Later, this theory was boldly applied to various fields of translation.

The interpretive theory draws from the practice of interpretation, which has also been applied to written translation. Translation is usually regarded as a kind of linguistic acts that transforms one language into another. However, the interpretive theory holds that a successful translation requires the interpretation of the passage and the knowledge beyond the linguistic knowledge. This theory provides significant guidance of the study of not only interpretation but also translation. At the same time, translators share the goal of comprehension and reformulation. All of the translators should be bold to seek suitable guiding theory, so as to continuously improve the quality of translation and provide more insights into this field.

### **Sense Equivalence and Cognitive Complements**

Lederer (1994) put forward the idea that the translator should have the desire to understand the meaning and have the corresponding knowledge in order to keep his/her comprehension consistent with the author's original meaning. It means that, in order to achieve sense equivalence, the translator must have the ability to make cognitive complements.

Cognitive complements include cognitive knowledge and cognitive environment. The former includes linguistic knowledge and extralinguistic knowledge. Extralinguistic knowledge is the meaning contained in words and the intention of the author. The latter refers to the extralinguistic knowledge derived from the text and the information separated from the original structure. In order to understand meaning in a complete context, it is necessary to confirm the concept and emotion of the author.

In the interpretive theory, the strategy of cognitive complements is frequently applied to the translation practice to achieve the goal of sense equivalence.

### **Three Core Steps in the Translation**

The first step is comprehension. Translators need to pay attention to the language signs and understand both the explicit and implicit meanings of the text. On the basis of the original text, and the analysis and understanding of it, the translator should make clear the main content of the original text.

The second step is deverbalisation, an isolation from the framework of the original language. Tournier (1977) pointed out that, each language has its unique environment and charm, and, if one wants to translate it well, he/she must leave this environment, free from its charm, so as to use the target language to express freely.

The third step is reformulation. After the translator comprehends the meaning, he should be able to clearly express the idea of the original text. At this stage, the interpretive theory indicates that two things should be applied to translation: One is to start from the meaning, covering the content and general idea of the original text; the second is to make the translated text easy to be understood.

## **Application of the Interpretive Theory in *Casablanca***

*Casablanca* owns a unique position in the history of films. It blends love, life, and political issues together.

In the film, political thoughts are weaved into love choices, into characters' buildings and actions. This film has received consistently good reviews. Crowther (1992) of the *New York Times* applauded the combination of "sentiment, humor and pathos with taut melodrama and bristling intrigue" (p. 27).

The application procedure of the interpretive theory to subtitle translation of *Casablanca* can be divided into three steps: comprehension, deverbalization, and reformulation.

### **Comprehension**

To meet the requirements of the interpretive theory, the translators need to understand both the linguistic components and metaphorical content of the text.

Example 1:

Rick: Of all the gin joints in all the town in all the world, she walks into mine.

里克：世界上有这么多城镇，城镇里又有这么多酒馆，而她却偏偏走进了我的。

After the separation of Rick and Ilsa in Paris, Rick thinks that he will never have a chance to see her again. But here in Casablanca of North America, where neither of them has been before, this unexpected encountering does happen. After Ilsa leaves his bar, Rick holds a glass of wine, absorbed in the memory of days in Paris, and then says this line to himself.

The interpretive theory requires the translators to not only understand the surface meanings, but also the deeper meanings. By saying these, Rick expresses his contradictory feelings. He keeps Ilsa in his heart all the time since she left with no goodbye while he never believes that there would be another chance to meet her again. Therefore, the use of repetition structure (这么多) and amplification (偏偏) vividly expresses Rick's mixed feelings and unbelievable tone.

At the lexical level, "joints" means joint ventures, and "gin" is a particular category of liquor. However, if this phrase is translated as "杜松子酒店", not only will it become difficult for the audience to understand, but also the aesthetic feeling of the original text will disappear. Li (2001) pointed out that the function of subtitles is to provide precise information to the readers or the viewers. Subtitle translators should discard blank information and present the core content of subtitles directly to the audience. Therefore, translators may choose a superordinate term to interpret its meaning in Chinese, such as "酒吧", "酒店", and "酒馆", which appear to be more precise and occupies less space. Among the three expressions, "酒馆" is the optimal choice, for the reason that it is originated from the ancient alcohol culture of China and remains untouched by loan words. With the history of this term, it brings romantic and resonant feelings to the Chinese audience.

Besides, in English, the expression of the address starts from the small areas to the larger ones, while, in Chinese, the opposite is true. With the word order adjusted, the translated text conforms to the Chinese habits of writing and meets the requirement of "faithful to the expression of the target language" in the interpretive theory.

The deep meaning of the text and the author's real intention of expression are to be grasped, thus obtaining a reasonable and satisfactory translation version. To achieve this, the strategies of amplification translation and cultural interpretation are usually applied.

### **Deverbalization**

According to the interpretive theory, the delivery of meanings is divorced from the language, which means that the translation should break from the limitations of language patterns, and meanwhile faithfully convey these meanings.

## Example 2:

Rick: Ilsa, I'm no good at being noble, but it doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world. Someday you'll understand that.

里克：依尔沙，我并没有什么值得人尊敬的地方。但是不难明白，在这个疯狂的世界里，三个小人物之间的问题，算不了什么大事。有一天你会了解的。

This line comes at the end of a conversation between his character Rick and his former lover Ilsa about why she should fly with her husband, rather than to stay and help her true love Rick. This scene represents that Rick has made the choice for them, ignoring their love trivia deliberately and focusing on the greater matter in the wartime.

The phrase "don't amount to a hill of beans" is translated as "算不了什么大事". "A hill of beans" is an American idiom. As a cheap crop in US, even a hill of beans is still worthless. Therefore, this phrase is commonly used to describe things that do not matter. However, Chinese audience may find it difficult to understand due to the cultural differences. The translation of local idioms requires to fill in the cultural blanks. In that case, free translation would be a good choice. "算不了什么大事" is a daily oral expression in Chinese, meaning that it is not a big deal.

In this way, it is in line with the requirements of the interpretive theory of "not only using linguistic knowledge, but also combining linguistic knowledge with non-linguistic knowledge". In conclusion, free translation can be realized under the guidance of the interpretive theory.

**Reformulation**

Reformulation requires the translator to use the language expressions easily accepted by the target audience while the meaning of the original text is preserved.

## Example 3:

Rick: Now, now... Here's looking at you, kid.

里克：现在……永志不忘，小姑娘。

The line "Here's looking at you, kid." was spoken four times in the film. For three times, it is used as a toast, during the flashback scenes of Rick and Ilsa falling in love. It is used again later in the movie when he bids Ilsa farewell.

In this scene, Rick sees her tears falling down, so he touches her face gently, looks into her eyes, and says this line. It was a final acknowledgment of her and of their love. Rick will always remember Ilsa and never forget the beautiful time they spend in Paris and in Casablanca.

"Here's to" is a common sentence structure of toasts in America, meaning appreciation. "Looking at you" can be understood as "I'm glad that you are here with me", implying that "looking at you" is a wonderful thing that is worth of being celebrated. Literally translated, this sentence will be "敬我在看着你". However, this expression is neither grammatical nor meaningful in Chinese.

"Here's looking at you" is a concrete description, while in Chinese, people tend to use abstract and general words to show their good wishes at toasts. "永志不忘" is a Chinese idiom which means "always bear in mind". The use of four-character idiom is also an application of domestication translation. While achieving the purpose of sense equivalence, it also draws the attention of Chinese audience, creating great sympathy and a deep sense of identity for the story. The translated version "永志不忘" can be the first impression of Chinese audience when it comes to the film *Casablanca*.

In this sentence, “kid” is an intimate and familiar address, regarding Ilsa as a young and lovable girl. The pet name “小姑娘” manages to express the exact meanings of the word “kid”. On the one hand, Ilsa is younger than Rick; on the other hand, despite of her relatively young age, she is Rick’s lover, which makes her a woman instead of a child. The translator should pay attention to the transformation between the abstract and the concrete in order to choose a proper strategy which can make his/her work more attractive to the audience.

However, the application of the interpretive theory also has its limitations.

Example 4:

Mr. Leuchtag: Liebchen, uh, sweetness heart, what watch?

Mrs. Leuchtag: Ten watch.

Mr. Leuchtag: Such much?

刘琪德先生：亲爱的——什么表？

刘琪德太太：十表。

刘琪德先生：这么多？

“Liebchen” is the German expression of “sweetheart”. In this conversation, the German couple try to show off their English ability by saying some seemingly clever things which turn out to be foolish instead. The meaning of this dialogue is easy to know. The correct English expression should be “What time? Ten o’clock. That late?” If the translator chooses to translate the expressions according to this layer of meaning, the humorous effect of the original text will be omitted. Besides, the true purpose of these lines is to mock at poor English of the couple. Therefore, the “stilted” literal translation is a better choice to achieve the same effect of the “stilted” lines.

### Conclusions

In this paper, the author applies the interpretive theory to subtitle translation and summarizes some translation strategies, such as amplification, free translation, and domestication. During the case studies, the author also notices the limitations of the interpretive theory in subtitle translation. Aiming to achieve sense equivalence, the interpretive translation strives to present the audience texts consistent with their understanding habits. However, it will inevitably cause the loss of cultural images in the original text. Seleskovitch has pointed out that translators need to have a wide range of linguistic knowledge and non-verbal knowledge to reasonably convey the meaning of the original text (Xu, 1998). Among them, for some words with dedicate cultural connotation, it is necessary to make full use of dictionaries, network, cultural classics, and other resources to verify its meaning and make every effort to be accurate, so as to achieve the combination of language and cognitive supplement required by the interpretation theory and ensure the professionalism and accuracy of the translation.

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