

A Study of Subtitle Translation of the Film *Coco* From the Perspective of Eco-translatology

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With the continuous development of globalization and the deepening cross-cultural exchanges, foreign films and TV dramas are constantly introduced into China, and the film *Coco* produced by Pixar Animation Studio has gained immense popularity among Chinese viewers, and subtitle translation has played a crucial role in this process. This essay will focus on the subtitle translation of *Coco* to explore the application of Eco-translatology theory within the subtitles, expecting to provide insights for future subtitle translation research from the perspective of three-dimensional transformation of language, culture, and communication.

Keywords: Eco-translatology, subtitle translation, *Coco*

Introduction

Coco is an animated film co-produced by Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studio. Inspired by Mexico's Day of the Dead, the movie tells the captivating story of a music-loving young boy named Miguel and a down-and-out musician named Hector as they embark on a magical adventure in a vibrant and mysterious world. The film won the Best Animated Feature at the 90th Academy Awards and is highly enjoyable to watch. This essay will delve into the subtitle translation of *Coco* according to three-dimensional theory of Eco-translatology proposed by Professor Hu Gengshen.

Features of Subtitle Translation

Subtitle translation in film differs significantly from other types of texts, as it is largely influenced by both technical and contextual factors. Film subtitles aim to serve the audience with a strong communicative function. In order to achieve optimal results in translating subtitles for a film, it is essential for translators to fully understand the characteristics of subtitle translation.

One of its prominent features is colloquialism, emphasizing the use of simple sentence structures and informal expressions to highlight the characters' images and personalities. While English often employs complex sentences and compound structures, the translation into Chinese should involve more concise sentences or phrases, requiring the subtitle translation to be smooth, coherent, and close to daily life.

In addition, popularity is also one of the most important features in film translation. Translators must consider uncontrollable factors, such as the audience's cultural background, knowledge, and age. Therefore, the translation aims to maximize the understanding for a diverse audience while ensuring the accurate expressions

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of the film's content. Translators, by delving into the cultural context of the film, strive to convey the content in a straightforward and engaging manner. However, it is important to strike a balance between popularity and fidelity to the original text and the translation should be clear and easy to understand without becoming overly colloquial or dull. In line with the principles of "faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance", the translation should accurately portray the characters and themes of the film.

Instantaneity is another major feature of subtitles, and given their momentary appearance on the screen, they're often synchronized with character dialogues and scene changes, so they usually appear for a very short time. Therefore, the first point to consider in subtitle translation is simplicity, ensuring easy comprehension and accurate and appropriate transformation from the original text into the target language.

In addition, during the translation process, the translator also needs to flexibly consider factors, such as the features of the source language and the target audience and translation goals in order to find the best translation techniques (Liu & Xiong, 2019, p. 178).

Eco-translatology Theory

Professor Hu Gengshen (2008) from Tsinghua University proposed the theory of Eco-translatology based on the fundamental principles of Darwin's "adaptation/selection" theory. Professor Hu (2008) believed,

The ultimate goal of translation is that the translated work can be widely accepted and passed down for a long time in a foreign cultural context. Therefore, in the process of translation, it is necessary to build an ecological context suitable for the survival of the "transplanted" text; otherwise, it might be like "To the south of the Huaihe River grow oranges, while to the north grow bitter oranges." Translators need to be rooted in the intersections of various forces, such as languages, cultures, and societies, constantly making choices and transformations. (p. 13)

Professor Hu Gengshen (2011, p. 8) further elucidated the nine research focuses and theoretical perspectives of Eco-translatology in his work *Research Focus and Theoretical Perspectives of Eco-translatology*. Among them is the concept of "three-dimensional transformation", which requires translators to make choices and transformations from the perspectives of language, culture, and communication in the ecological context of translation. The transformation on the language dimension involves appropriate language switching during the translation process. Therefore, translators need to pay attention to the accurate use of words, flexible application of grammar, and clever restructuring of sentence structures. The cultural dimension transformation refers to the process which is a cross-cultural exchange. Therefore, translators should not only limit to language-level transformations, but also skillfully handle culture-loaded terms in order to facilitate communication and transformation between different cultures. The transformation on the communication dimension considers the translator's role not only in accurately conveying language and culture, but also in understanding the communicative function of the translation. In addition, the translation needs to emphasize the communicative aspect and fully reflect the meaning of the original text, with the ultimate goal of facilitating positive communication between two different cultures.

The Three-Dimensional Transformation in the Subtitle Translation of *Coco*

Translators play a pivotal role in film subtitle translation, and they have to fully consider the adaptive transformation of the three dimensions of language, culture, and communication, so as to convey the real connotation of the films to the audience of the target language (Wang, 2023, p. 175). This chapter will analyze the subtitle translation of the movie *Coco* from the above three dimensions.

Language Dimensional Adaption and Transformation

In Eco-translatology theory, the concept of “adaptive selection and transformation on the language dimension” requires translators to make adaptive choices and transformations in terms of both bilingual cultural backgrounds and grammatical characteristics during the translation process. The adaptive transformation on the language dimension, from source language to target language, takes place in various aspects (Hu, 2008, p. 13).

This requires translators to consider various factors within the ecological context, accurately grasp the original meaning, and, based on this foundation, choose appropriate linguistic forms for expression. In the subtitle translation of *Coco*, the translator’s choice of language is concise and precise, fully reflecting the adaptive transformation on the language dimension (Zhou, 2023, p. 49).

Example 1: I thought it might’ve been one of those made up things that adults tell kids like vitamins.

Translation: 我以为又是大人骗小孩子的故事呢，多吃菜，长得快。

Analysis: The original text contains the attributive clause “that adults tell kids”, and attributive clauses are a frequently used expression in English, and the translation of them is also a key point of difference between Chinese and English grammar. Chinese tends to place the least important words before the crucial ones, while English follows the opposite pattern, expressing the main content clearly first. The translation here places the attributive clause entirely before the modified word “things”, adhering to Chinese expressions and conveying the speaker’s original meaning (Li, 2021, p. 39).

Example 2: A shoe maker. Through and through.

Translation: 都会做鞋，祖传的手艺。

Analysis: This happened when Miguel’s family expressed their desire for him to inherit the family tradition of shoemaking. The original text is presented in the form of two short sentences, and if using literal translation, it would be “一个鞋匠，从头到尾”. Since English is a static language, often using nouns, while Chinese is a dynamic language, which is more inclined to verbs, the translator transforms the noun structure “鞋匠” into the verb structure “做鞋”, which is more natural and aligns with Chinese expression habits (Zhou, 2023, p. 49). The addition of “祖传” emphasizes that it has been passed down from generation to generation, clarifying the meaning (Zeng, 2023, p. 74).

Example 3: chin goes in

Translation: 面容憔悴

Example 4: the right amount of obvious

Translation: 恰到好处

Example 5: One cannot deny who one is meant to be.

Translation: 天命难违。

Example 6: He and his family would sing and dance and count their blessings.

Translation: 他和他的家人总是载歌载舞、知足常乐。

Analysis: The four-character phrase is a unique linguistic and grammatical phenomenon in Chinese and it succinctly expresses ideas (Yuan, 2023, p. 100). By using four-character phrases, the Chinese translation in Examples 3-6 significantly shortens the length of sentences. In addition, it aligns well with the characteristics of subtitle translation, being brief yet profound (He & Bao, 2022, p. 15). If using the method of literal translation, it might sound rigid, so the translator opts for familiar phrases which are easily understood in Chinese popular culture, maintaining simplicity without lacking connotation.

Culture Dimensional Adaption and Transformation

“Culture dimensional transformation” refers to accurately conveying the cultural connotations of the original text, requiring translators to delve into the cultures of both source and target language. Also, translators should fully consider the cultural differences, make a precise analysis of the context, and avoid translation discrepancies due to cultural differences (Zhou, 2023, p. 49).

In conversations involving individuals from different cultural backgrounds or varying levels of cultural knowledge, various culture-loaded terms emerge. The cultural connotations represented by these terms may not be quickly understood by audiences from other countries when watching a film. Therefore, the translator’s role is to enable the audience to grasp the profound meaning behind the lines within the limited subtitles and create resonance with the characters (Li, 2021, p. 39). In the translation process, the translator should refer to the intended purpose of the translated text in the target language and cultural context. Therefore, the translation must make sense within the target language context to effectively convey meaning (Baker & Saldanha, 2008, p. 32).

Example 1: Oh, you’re a twig.

Translation: 瞧你瘦得跟猴儿似的。

Analysis: The literal meaning of “twig” is “thin or tender branch”. In this context, the family were gathering around the table for a meal, and the grandmother, looking at Miguel’s slender arms, commented that he was too thin and asked him to eat more. If using literal translation, the translation would be “噢，你是小树枝”. It would seem strange and leave the audience puzzled. Therefore, the translation is made to paraphrase it as “瘦得跟猴儿似的”，which Chinese audiences can quickly understand. What more, this expression aligns with the Chinese way of describing someone as being thin, fitting well with our linguistic habits (Zeng, 2023, p. 72). It is also a translation that is concise and captures the core cultural meaning and aligns with the features of film subtitles such as instantaneity. This ensures that the target language audience can instantly comprehend the intended meaning, making the translation more idiomatic.

This translation also reflects the importance of finding equivalent expressions in the target culture. It also emphasizes the preservation of the original humor factors. Handling the culture dimensional transformation is not only about linguistic translation, but also about conveying emotions and tones, ensuring the smoothness of the translation across cultures. Therefore, from the perspective of culture dimensional adaptation and transformation, this translation makes the target text more close to the original text and interesting, allowing the audience in another culture to experience the humor and emotions conveyed in the original text.

Example 2: But my father, he will never give his permission.

Translation: 但是，神父是不会允许的。

Analysis: In Western history, due to the profound religious customs and culture, their language development has been significantly influenced. For the word “father”, it not only represents “父亲” or “家族长辈”, but more importantly, it can also signify “神父” which is a religious term. This reflects the elevated status and symbolization of religion in Western countries. This translation enriches the cultural perspective of the target language audience (Zhu, 2022, p. 240). From the culture dimensional perspective of Eco-translatology theory, this kind of transformation is not merely a linguistic substitution but also a subtle adjustment to the social and cultural background. Overall, the translation in this example highlights how the translator, while conveying information, adjusts language and cultural factors to ensure that the target audience can understand and feel the

similar cultural context. This culture dimensional adaption and transformation contributes to fostering understanding between different cultures and making the translation more precise and locally distinctive.

Example 3: The mighty Xolo dog! Guider of wandering spirits.

Translation: 一条墨西哥无毛犬，你为流浪的亡灵引路。

Example 4: You'll craft huaraches just like your Tia Victoria.

Translation: 你可以做凉鞋，像你维多利亚姨奶奶那样。

Example 5: I asked if you would like more tamales.

Translation: 我问你要不要再多吃几个玉米粽子。

Analysis: In the three examples above, “Xolo dog”, “huaraches”, and “tamales” are all typical Mexican terms. “Xolo dog” originates from Aztec language, originally named “Xoloitzcuin-tle” where “Xoloi” refers to the god of lightning and death and “tzcuintle” refers to the dog that guides the deceased to the underground world, known for its hairlessness. Due to its rarity, it is relatively unknown. However, the translator identifies the source meaning, rendering it as “无毛狗”, preserving the Mexican meaning and the image in the movie. “Huaraches” also comes from Mexican, referring to flat sandals with leather straps produced in central and southern Mexico during Columbian Period, similar to “凉鞋” in Chinese. Therefore, such translation makes it easier to understand and spread. “Tamales” refers to a traditional Mexican food with skin and filling, similar to Chinese sticky rice dumplings. However, its main distinction from Chinese rice dumplings is that its skin is made from corn leaves. Therefore, the translator, based on its appearance, translates it as “玉米粽子” to facilitate better understanding for Chinese audiences. The translation of these culturally distinctive words reflects the ongoing process of the translator adapting to the target language context and making choices, which helps the audience better understand the storyline (He & Bao, 2022, p. 17). These examples show the translator’s flexible use in conveying cultural information, in order to ensure that the cultural factors and emotions of the movie can be understood in another culture.

Communication Dimensional Adaption and Transformation

The communication dimensional adaptive selection and transformation refers to the translator’s focus on adapting to the communicative intent between two languages in the translation process. This type of adaptive selection and transformation requires the translator, in addition to converting language information and conveying cultural connotations, to place emphasis on the communicative level and to ensure that the communicative intent of the original text is reflected in the translation (Hu, 2011, p. 8).

During the process of subtitle translation, translators should consider the communicative purpose and translation should not remain superficial to language and culture. In addition, the translation is not about being overly elegant; instead, the ultimate goal is to convey the communicative information quickly and in a straightforward manner. The translators can use methods such as amplification, complementary translation, or omission to achieve the communicative purpose (Yuan, 2023, p. 101).

Example 1: Ay, ay, ay, muchacho!

Translation: 唉，你这小子！

Example 2: Hold it, muchacho.

Translation: 等一等，小朋友。

Analysis: In Examples 1 and 2, the word “muchacho” in Spanish means child or young man, generally referring to youngsters. When dealing with the repeated word “muchacho” in the lines, the translator does not

adopt a consistent approach. Instead, the word is translated as “小子” or “小朋友”, because the translator employs the word with different emotional tones based on the specific communicative context. This approach vividly reflects the characters’ emotional changes, making the audience understand these characters’ personalities better. From these examples, we can see the translator’s outstanding translation skills in this film (Zhu, 2022, p. 240).

Example 3: You’ll feel better after you eat with your family.

Translation: 一家人吃个饭就什么都过去了。

Analysis: Miguel unexpectedly discovered that de la Cruz was his great-great-grandfather and excitedly shared his thoughts with his family. However, his family strongly opposed and demanded that he refrain from music. Miguel had a verbal conflict with his grandmother, who believed that it was music that had led him to this personality. In a fit of anger, she smashed Miguel’s guitar. Heartbroken and in tears, Miguel was later comforted by his grandmother who said that everything would be okay after having a meal. Here, “feel better” is translated as “什么都过去了”, echoing the film’s theme that “family is the most important” (Lin & Tan, 2019, p. 50). This can reflect the movie’s theme, making the target language audience emotionally resonate with the source language audience, better achieving communicative purposes and contributing to the film’s broader promotion (Wang, 2023, p. 176).

Example 4: Abuelita runs our house just like Mama Imelda did.

Translation: 我奶奶管起家来和老祖宗一模一样。

Analysis: Abuelita is Miguel’s grandmother. This happened when Miguel complained about his grandmother’s controlling ways. Although his grandmother’s name had been mentioned earlier, especially the foreign names can be challenging for the audience. If it is translated directly as “Abuelita”, the audience may not know who she is. Therefore, to ensure clarity and continuity, the translator renders “Abuelita” as “我奶奶” (my grandmother), making it easy to understand for the audience (Zeng, 2023, p. 73). By using “我奶奶”, the translation aligns more closely with the cultural and social background of Chinese audiences, as it is common in China to use kinship terms to express their relations. This translation method helps reduce cultural barriers, making it easier for Chinese audiences to establish their emotional connections. Through a more suitable expression, the translation achieves more effective communication in the communicative dimension. In addition, in Example 5, by using “老祖宗” to convey “Mama Imelda”, it emphasizes heritage and family relations, facilitating a closer emotional connection.

Conclusion

With the vigorous development of mainstream media, the theory of Eco-translatology provides powerful theoretical guidance and a novel research perspective for subtitle translation. In the translation process, translators must consider the context of the translated text and strive to achieve adaptive selection and transformation with different dimensions (Yuan, 2023, p. 101) in order to ensure a balance between the source language and the target language, which is the focus of Eco-translatology theory. From the perspective of it, the subtitle translation of the film *Coco* has appropriately transformed the source language. Successful practice demonstrates that the subtitle translation guided by the three-dimensional adaptive selection and transformation helps translators understand the significant differences between two languages and cultures, thereby improving the quality of translations and providing the target language audiences with a viewing experience equivalent to that of the source language audiences (Zhou, 2023, p. 50). At the same time, the successful translation of movie subtitles plays a crucial role in promoting cultural exchange, cross-cultural dissemination of films, and the prosperity of

the film industry (Li, 2021, p. 40). This research hopes to provide some references and inspiration for a broader range of translation studies and practices.

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