

Film Title Translation Methods From the Cultural Difference Aspects

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Abstract

With the increasing cultural exchanges between China and the rest of the world, especially with the Western countries, the film has gradually stood out as an important media of communication. Film title, as one of the most influential factors of a good film, has always been the general impression of the film for audience. Base on that point, we can see that film title plays an important role in the process of culture exchange. Therefore, in view of the cultural medium function of the film title translation, this paper introduces the film title translation characteristics and the impact of cultural differences on it. The paper also discusses the film title translation principles and the different techniques.

Key words: Film title translation; Cultural differences

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INTRODUCTION

Since last decades, large numbers of foreign films were introduced into China, among which are blockbusters from Hollywood, the world filmmaking center. Meanwhile, Chinese films are increasingly introduced and launched in western countries and some are even awarded prizes in major film festivals. Therefore, the Chinese films, which were put on only in China in the past, have to adopt the English film titles presently. And nowadays, films play a

very important part in our lives. We cannot deny that film has become one of the most influential mass media. So the study of film title translation should not be neglected. However, just like a mirror of the culture, film reflects our contemporary attitudes, philosophies, values, and lifestyles. Film title, as one of the essential element of the film, also builds a convenient bridge for cross-cultural communications. Thus, it is necessary for us to take the cultural differences into consideration and make a right choice of film title translation.

This paper has six parts and one conclusion. Part two introduces the film title name classifications. Part three explains the literature review of the translation theories. Part four gives the characteristics of film title translation. Part five introduces the present errors of film title translation. Part six mainly explains the principles of film title translation. In this part, the paper discusses the different strategies in translating different film titles according to the different situations. The last part is the conclusion and the paper draws to the end at this part.

1. FILM TITLE NAME CLASSIFICATIONS

Film titles are the brands for films with the function of providing information about the story for the audience. They summarize the main plot, reveal the theme or offer some clue. And the audience comprehension for the film itself is deepened through its film title. It is necessary for us to know how films are named so we can have a better understanding of the nature of film titles. The following are four main categories.

1.1 Take People's Name as Film Title

Some films use personal names as the titles, which may be the hero and the heroine's names or their positions. For instance, Alfie, Juno and the film Sweeney Todd fall into this category. Moreover, the hero may not necessarily be a human being but can be some animal like a dog or cat or a cartoon figure such as Garfield and Scooby Doo.

1.2 Take Plot or Clue as Film Title

The plot may be reflected by its title such as the film *Click*. This is a story of a man who realizes with the help of a magical remote, that love is the most important thing in his life. He can turn back or forward time only by a click of the remote. When the time clock of his life finally runs out for time, he can never go back and undo the missed opportunities. The whole story developed by the hero's clicking of the remote. From the title, audiences can easily find out what the film is about.

1.3 Take the Scene as Film Title

Using the names of the settings becomes the titles of English films is not uncommon. This kind of film title clearly states the place and conditions the story takes place. They are the important scenes in the stories, which may be a city, a ship, a plane or even a car. Films with such titles can be found easily, such as *The Lake House* and *Notting Hill*.

1.4 Take Time as Film Title

Time is a great important element of the film, which consists the basic theme of a story. Some films directly adopt a particular time noun as titles such as *Sweet November*.

1.5 Take Theme as Film Title

A film has its own theme and some film titles are also named after their themes. Compared with the above types, they are more abstract. Only after you see the film, will you know how it was named. Such films are easily found as *Brave Heart*.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

It is difficult to define culture. From the sociologists' point of view, culture means the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts and all other products of human work and thought. Each society has its own unique culture which is distinctly different from other society. As suggested previously, language is a social phenomenon and does not exist in isolation. In fact, it is closely related to other aspects of the society in which it is spoken and used by most people as their mother tongue. As far as the relationship between language and culture is concerned, a commonly held opinion is that language mirrors, carries culture and culture provides frame in which a language operates and functions. Culture is supposed to penetrate and bind every aspect of language, especially its meaning system. It imprints language with all its marks. The two are in a relation of a part to the whole. By means of language, a culture teaches, communicates and transmits its beliefs, values, norms, etc. It mainly relies on language as a means of interaction among its members. Since infancy, an individual starts to learn the culture into which he/she was born while learning simultaneously to speak his/her mother tongue as part of that culture.

In a word, language is a component of culture and plays a very important role in culture. Language and culture rely on each other. Without language, culture would be impossible. Language is the basis of entire culture, and that it is only in language that culture can be well presented and handed down from generation to generation. On the other hand, language is influenced and shaped by culture; it reflects culture. Language reflects characteristic of culture and predicts the developing orientation of culture. In the broadest sense, language is the symbolic representation of a people.

In the past ten years remarkable achievements have been made in China's translation field and scholars have been engaged in translation studies from a cross-cultural perspective since translating is to reproduce in the receptor language in a closest and natural way of the source language (Nida, 2001). When cultural differences approach is considered in the matter of translation, it has become more complicated. The famous scholar of translation Eugene A. Nida once divided culture into five categories, namely, ecologic culture, language culture, religious culture, material culture and social culture (Nida, 1993). All these cultural aspects can be found in films and also reflected at the level of film titles.

In translating a title, we should first pay attention to the cultural connotation of the source title. The following parts are the main categories of the Influence of cultural difference on translation, which is a vital step. Only when we understand the meaning behind the title, can we decide the strategies in translation and do a better job on film title translation.

2.1 The Difference in Religion

Religion is within the range of culture and it is defined as the totality of beliefs and practices of a society (Nida, 1993). Religion is so distinguished and influential in western society, and Christianity is no doubt the biggest influence upon the western people and their lives in all the aspects are penetrated so powerfully by Christian influence. Therefore, English titles with religious meanings should be translated into Chinese ones with both the literal and religious meanings conveyed. The translator should acquire adequate knowledge of the western religions; otherwise the religious meanings may be lost during the translating process. An American film, *Seven*, tells a story that a murderer kills his victims in a strange and crazy way. According to the Bible, there are seven sins unforgivable and anyone with one of the sins must die as a punishment from God. The seven sins are gluttony, greed, sloth, envy, wrath, pride and lust. The murderer tries to play the role of God, killing seven people including himself, in a way each victim stands for one with a sin of the seven. Undoubtedly, the title refers to the seven sins mentioned in the Bible. Therefore, the Chinese title for the film is *qi zong zui*, not *qi*. Without certain knowledge of the religion of the west, translators may miss part of the information that the original title conveys.

2.2 The Difference in the Comprehension of Idiom

Scholars have to pay much attention on idiom translation. In which idiom is considered as the special cultural image. Its translation requires not only to convey the meaning of the original as much as possible but also to keep the national features. The film *Hobson's Choice* can embody the difference in the comprehension of Idioms perfectly. This title gives the audiences an impression that Hobson is the hero's name and the film is about his making a great choice. Nevertheless, the story is about a shoe shop boss whose name is Hobson, refused his first daughter to marry with the counterjumper of his shop. The translator apparently lacks adequate knowledge of the English idiom, which means a situation in which there is only one thing you can possibly do, unless you do nothing. Another comedy, which was released in 2005 entitled *Break a Leg*. The story is about a struggling actor who is willing to go to any length to get a job. For most Chinese audience may think that the some characters' legs were broken in this film. But actually, "break a leg" is a well-known saying in theatre, which means "good luck". It is typically said to actors before they go out onto stage to perform. The expression reflects a theatrical superstition in which wishing a person "good luck" is considered bad luck. The expression is sometimes used outside the theatre as superstitions and customs travel through other professions and then into common use.

2.3 The Difference in Values and Attitudes

The western and the Chinese people traditionally have different opinions of animals, such as dragon. Chinese people admire and worship this imagined animal. Dragon is the symbol of our Chinese nation; and it is also the symbol of authority, strength and good fortune. Though In English, dragon can be associated with "strength" and "power", which gives derogatory symbols. When seeing this word in English, people always think of cruelty, devilishness and viciousness. Another case in this point is dog. The English people have a high opinion of the dog and think a dog to be a faithful friend, thus there are many canine idioms in English, most of which have a commendatory sense such as "clever dog"-clever boy or clever guy; "to help a lame dog over a stile"-to help a person in trouble; "Love me, love my dog"-accept my friends as yours. However, In China, people often despise such an animal, therefore, a dog is usually associated with bad guys. Jet Li's famous Hollywood film entitled *Danny the Dog* was translated into *meng hu chu long* in Chinese. The translator uses the word *hu* (tiger) instead of the word *gou* (dog).

2.4 The Difference in Historical Allusion

Farewell My Concubine was awarded prizes in the 49th Cannes Film Festival. The word *Concubine* means

that a woman contracted to a man as a secondary wife, often having few legal rights and low social status in imperial China. However this English title cannot convey any information about the historical meaning, and the audience will not know the film have any connection with traditional Peking opera.

3. FILM TITLE TRANSLATION ERRORS

Due to the translators' carelessness, lack of linguistic and cultural knowledge acquired, or improper pursuit of commercial profits, inappositeness translations of film title occur at times. It can be divided into the following categories:

3.1 Lacking a Comprehensive View of the Story

A title is best left untranslated until the rest of the assignment is completed (Newmark, 2001). As for a film title, it is best left untranslated until the translator has watched the film carefully and fully understands the story. In this case, the translator should by no means take the most common meaning for its Chinese rendering. Only when he gets the gist of the film by a comprehensive view of the story, can he make a right and the best choice among many possible renderings. Someone translated *The Shawshank's Redemption* into *ci ji* 1995. The Chinese word *ci ji* in English means excitement; however, this film is not the exciting type of film but a very thought-provoking one. And the most unsatisfactory part is that the translator uses 1995 as the title only because this film was released in 1995.

3.2 Influence of Commercial Profits

The film, as a modern product, is expected to earn a large box office income. Film titles are inevitably influenced by this purpose. So there have emerged a good many exciting, passionate, mysterious or thrilling titles. But some of these titles actually reflect nothing of the original or the story. For example, in order to earn a large box office income, a comedy film named *Things Are Though All Over* was translated into Chinese as *bao bei shang cuo chuang* which means a girl sleeps with the wrong man.

3.3 The Ignorance of the Cultural Background

Culture is the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression (Newmark, 2001). Any performance should be conducted within the range of culture. Due to the great differences between the English and Chinese cultures and translators' lack of adequate knowledge of them, mistranslation occurs. For example, the Oscar-winner *American Beauty* is difficult to understand for most Chinese audiences. According to the dictionary, *American Beauty* is a type of rose bearing large, long-stemmed purplish-red flowers instead of the beautiful girl.

3.4 Equate Two Different Cultural Images Forcefully

Cultural image is a kind of cultural symbol, which has the fixed cultural meaning with profound association. It makes people easily to achieve the communication effectively and accurately (Nida, 1993). Equating two different cultural images forcefully will just leave confusion for foreign audience. Here is the example: yue guang bao he was translated into Chinese Pandora's Box. In western culture, Pandora is the first woman, bestowed upon humankind as a punishment for Prometheus's theft of fire. Entrusted with a box containing all the ills that could plague people, she opened it out of curiosity and thereby released all the evils of human life. Languages cannot exclude culture: for truly successful translating, biculturalism is even more important than bilingualism (Nida, 1993). Therefore, film titles have an inseparable relationship with culture. Most film titles are found to carry certain cultural meanings. People in the east and west live in quite different cultures, and they speak, think and behave in different ways accordingly. Therefore, anyone who attempts to translate needs to be aware of the cultural factor and be very careful with it. If he pays no or little attention to it, he may probably fail to achieve the goal of translating equivalently.

The film title Matchstick Men, translated into Chinese huo chai ren, confused the general Chinese audience, who do not have adequate knowledge of the American culture. In English culture, 'matchstick men' is a slang expression, referring to super cheats or swindlers. Its English title reveals the hero's identity, thus giving away certain information of the story, while its Chinese one makes the audience wonder the actual relation between the title and the story. Due to the cultural uniqueness, such rendering should be avoided as much as possible for it can by no means fulfill its function. This Chinese rendering cannot be regarded as a proper one for lack of cultural translation.

4. FILM TITLE TRANSLATING STRATEGIES

4.1 Literal Translation

Literal translation is a kind of "word for word" translation, which can be called direct translation. It is not that kind of translation which transmits the general sense of the source language. When the audiences of the target language may understand the image of the cultural elements easily, translators should choose to use this method of translation. Out of context, the lexical words are again translated, but the source language constructions are still translated to the source audience as the original. (Newmark, 2001). In his book, Newmark put forward that if it ensures pragmatic and referential equivalence to the original language, literal translation should not be avoided and is a sensible choice (Newmark, 2001).

4.2 Substitution and Omission

The substitution is an efficient technique of translation, compared with the literal translation with long explanation. The target audiences can understand the source culture quite well through this technique. Substitution can make the readers feel familiar about the image of the translation, which is the most important advantage of using substitution. Most of the time, in order to help the target audiences understand the source language deeply, translators have to use the target culture frames (Leech, 1983).

4.3 Free Translation

Free translation reproduces the content without the form of the source language, or the matter without the manner. There are many differences between free translation and literal translation. Most of the time, it includes the aspects of pretentious and prolix. Sometimes, it is also called as a paraphrase of intralingua translation (Newmark, 2001). Free translation makes the translation in the target context conform to the principles of target culture and helps translators clean away the obstacles of the source language. Free translation can be used in many cases. The intention of free translation technique is not to be bounded by the form of expression, but to help the audiences catch the meaning of the source language, which is different from the intention of literal equivalence in literal translation (Nida, 1993). Although the target hearers may have no opportunity to feel the expression of another culture, free translation ensures the exact understanding of the target language.

CONCLUSION

Nowadays, cross-cultural contacts frequently appear and we are involved in cross-cultural communication. Lots of people who are from different countries and cultural backgrounds are likely to be together and communicate with each other. They tend to express their opinions on issues of many aspects, such as cultural, political, economic, etc. People should have confidence that they can be easily understood and they should believe that they can express themselves clearly, if they want to communicate with others. Therefore, translators play a greatly important role during cross-cultural communication, which acts as a bridge between the two cultures and ensures the successful communication between the two sides. Film title translation is not an easy job to deal with. We have to consider many factors when translating titles, such as linguistic, commercial, and aesthetic aspects. A good translation should be attractive and audiences are willing to go to the cinema. From what was discussed above, we can conclude that film title translation is closely related to cultural factors in language. Without the cultural knowledge, it is difficult to translate the original into target language accurately.

Among numerous translation theories, we cannot say absolutely which the best is. They have their advantages and disadvantages. To take cultural difference into account is very helpful in guiding film title translation. Only by doing so, will the titles fulfill their functions.

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