



## A Comparative Study on Subtitle Translation of Animated Films From the Perspective of Reception Theory: A Case Study of *Zootopia*

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### Abstract

Animated films, viewed as constant and faithful companions of children in their growth, play an important role in the development of their character, so subtitle translation of animated films accordingly draws the due attention from the translation circles. Sometimes there are more than one translated version for a single film and a comparative study is of academic significance. Reception Aesthetics Theory is mainly a literary criticism theory which changed the traditional perceptions of author-centeredness and text-centeredness, presenting reader-centered paradigm on the stage. Based on an analysis of the linguistic features of animated films and the children audience and taking *Zootopia* as an example, the author conducts a comparative study of the two versions of subtitle translation from the lexical, syntactic and rhetorical levels, in the hope of finding some applicable rules for subtitle translation of animated films from the perspective of Reception Aesthetics Theory and shedding some new light on future subtitle translation practice and research.

**Key words:** Animated film; Children audience; Reception aesthetics theory; Subtitle translation; *Zootopia*

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### INTRODUCTION

Reception Aesthetics Theory, also known as Aesthetics of Reception and Reception Theory, was proposed in 1976 by Professor Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser in German. The core concepts of the theory could be summarized as “readers-centeredness, horizon of expectations, appealing structure and implied readers.” Jauss pointed out that the printed book could only achieve its value by readers’ appreciation and acceptance. Readers play an important role in the process and their participation is vital to the process of transferring a text to a literary work. Horizon of expectation indicates the readers’ expectation for the book, changing with the growth of the readers’ experience and understanding. And the inconsistency between the works and readers’ horizon of expectation results in the aesthetic distance. Two predominant elements of appealing structure are blanks and indeterminate factors. Two predominant elements of appealing structure are blanks and indeterminate factors, which demonstrate the uncertainty in literature work. Implied readers are not the exact reader but the reader whose intelligence and background knowledge and some other personal factors are in line with the books. In the wake of development in translation studies and the establishment of reception aesthetics theory, studies from the perspective of translator and readers are gaining more and more attention from modern scholars. Reception Aesthetics broadens the vision for literary study as well as translation study (Zhu, 2004, p.179). This paper compares the two subtitle translation versions of *Zootopia* collected from movie website and “The State Administration of Radio Film and Television” (hereinafter referred to as “official version”) under the guidance of Reception Aesthetics Theory on the basis of analyzing the characteristics of children.

## 1. FEATURES OF ANIMATED FILMS AND CHILDREN AUDIENCE

### 1.1 The Features of Animated Films

Animated films are produced to bring fun to children and infuse lessons of living into their minds through unique ways and perspectives. Obviously, children are the “implied readers” of animated films. According to Qian Shaochang’s statement, “film language is distinct from written language” in that the former is credited with the properties of (a) voice is an indispensable part of film; (b) comprehensive factors are included in a film; (c) subtitles are required to be finished in a limited time; (d) movie subtitle should be simple and easy to understand; (e) explanatory notes are not suitable in movie subtitle.” (Qian, 2000, p.64) To be more specific, animated film subtitles tend to be innovative and imaginative. Moreover, it usually adopts various kinds of rhetorical devices for vividness of the language.

### 1.2 Characteristics of Children Audience

It is safe to say that childhood is the best period in our life during which our cognition, logic, mind, intelligence and moral knowledge are keeping developing. The major characteristics of children audience could be concluded as follows: (a) insufficient cognitive competence; (b) immature logic and mental ability; (c) shortage of life experience; (d) curiosity about the world; (e) they want authentic, virtuous and beautiful things and admire hero worship. Hence the subtitle of animated film should take these characteristics of children into account and accordingly abide by the following principles: (a) the words used should be simple and interesting; (b) the sentences should be easy to understand; (c) repetition, rhythm and musical sound would be preferred; (d) positive emotion and value should be infused in language (Xie, 2012, p.122).

## 2. CASE STUDY OF SUBTITLE TRANSLATION UNDER RECEPTION THEORY

### 2.1 On the Lexical Level

Children’s language system features simple, clear, specific and mild vocabulary. Therefore, it is unnecessary to use elegant and classical language. Children’s films should be understood by child audience. If they failed to comprehend some words or phrases, their interests in that work would diminish.

Example 1: There is never been a bunny cop, never.

**Online version:** 从没有兔子当过警察, 从没有, 从没有.

**Official version:** 兔子当不了警察, 当不了, 当不了.

Analysis: In this movie, the little rabbit (Judy) was bitterly scorned by the coach for its failure in the physical fitness test. The negative internal monologues were keeping swirling in Judy’s mind. The superficial meaning of “never” in the online version is that there was no rabbit police in the history. But in the official version, “dang bu liao” means rabbits are unqualified to be policemen, and “bu liao” pronounced more fluent when being placed at the end in Chinese grammar. What’s more, the second version is more concise on the whole. Young kids are equipped with primary language knowledge system and the readers’ horizon of expectations is based on their literary knowledge as well as their perception of language. Therefore, animated film, which aims to attract children’s attention, should give top priority to vocabulary that is smooth to read and easy to remember.

Example 2: Bell Wether, make room, will you?  
Come on.

**Online version:** 腾个地儿, 让让.

**Official version:** 头羊, 快点让开.

Analysis: The lion mayor asks his assistant for a room in rabbit Judy’s graduation ceremony. The tone of voice in the official version is quite rude and ungracious, and that do not match his decent identity in children’s expectation for a mayor. On the contrary, the online version “Teng ge di er” belongs to Chinese dialect which is familiar to Chinese audience. According to Jauss, one of the good ways to construct readers’ horizon expectations is the application of familiar norms, because when the readers read a new work, they bring with them their “horizon of expectations” which is closely related to the individual’s historical, cultural conditioning and the way he or she perceives reality (Jauss, 1982, p.23). Besides, “Rang rang” is a kind of courteous communicating way that should be nurtured carefully during the long period of children’s growth, especial for their moral habits cultivation. The use of R-ending retroflection is more natural in the view of audience.

Example 3: Oh, Stu. Pull it together.

**Online version:** 斯图, 振作点.

**Official version:** 他爸, 别当着孩子哭.

Analysis: As Judy will leave home and embrace new life in the modern city, tears were capriciously glittering in her father’s eyes. The original text is her mother’s gentle comforts. In the online version, her mother calls her father’s name directly as “Stu”, which does not match with the Chinese traditional culture of appellation between couples. The latter version “Ta ba” applies the principle of domestication and presents a kind and considerate image of the mother in front of the audience. Therefore, compared with “Stu”, “Ta ba” sounds more spontaneous to Chinese audience, because in children’s expectation,

relationship between their parents should be intimate and harmonious. As for “Zhen zuo dian” and “Bie dang zhe hai zi ku”, one is the positive expression and the other belongs to the reverse.

According to the specific situation, the latter version would be more appropriate as a comfort and encouragement. From the two versions of translation it can be concluded that “every word is a new word in a different situation”.

According to the specific situation, the latter version would be more appropriate as a comfort and encouragement. From the two versions of translation it can be concluded that “every word is a new word in a different situation”, and translators should take context of the situation into consideration. Namely, the ways to interpret the original text is not fixed but changing with the circumstances. Considering satisfying the directed expectation of the readers, the translator would better to select the most suitable meaning to make the context more compact and coherent.

Example 4: You are even **cuter** than I thought you'd be.

**Online version:** 你比我想象的要萌.

**Official version:** 你比我想象的还要可爱.

Analysis: Both of the two are simple and accurate. However, the online version not only correctly conveys the literal meaning, but also demonstrates the fashionable element with cyber language. There are two aspects of readers' expectations: One is the direct expectation; the other is the creative expectation, also called indirect expectation. Direct expectation is a cultural and literary habit which the readers have already acquired and it helps them select the content familiar to them. However, the readers cannot be satisfied with the familiar knowledge, and they prefer to accept something different or new. This kind of desire results from the creative expectation. The creative expectation urges the readers to learn new things. Thus, the directed expectation is enriched and the creative expectation is developed to some extent. The application of the Chinese cyber language in the online version somehow makes the foreign movie more acceptable and vivid to Chinese ears. Compared with “Ke ai” in the official version, the Chinese catchword is closer to the young audiences' modern life. It would enhance their direct expectation and improve the indirect expectation.

## 2.2 On the Syntactical Level

There are great differences between English and Chinese in the syntactic structure. Hypotactic sentences are commonly used in English, while in Chinese paratactic sentences are frequently used. Besides, English sentences tend to use linking words, but in Chinese, single sentences are preferred. Thus, when translating from English into Chinese, the translator should pay attention to the length, structure and linking words of the sentences.

Example 5: I want you to remember this moment, and the next time you will think you ever be anything more than just a stupid carrot-farming dumb bunny.

**Online version:** 你给我好好记着, 你就是只该死的只会种萝卜的兔子. 除此之外你什么都干不了.

**Official version:** 你给我记住这一刻, 免得你再不分. 忘了自己就是只种萝卜的蠢兔子.

Analysis: In the online version, “Gaisi” means die as soon as quickly, and this phrase does not properly match with the characteristics of little fox in small children's expectation. And the speaking tone in official version is more acceptable. It is noteworthy that both two target versions changed the sentence structure and order but the core meaning remains. Nida once displayed that certain rather radical departures from the formal structure are not only legitimate but may even be highly desirable. To reproduce the language, one must make a good many grammatical, lexical and syntactical adjustments (Nida, 1969, pp.12-13). Therefore, appropriate changes in sentences structure under the guidance of target language syntactical principle may satisfy kids' horizon of expectations.

Example 6: We are aloud. Don't expect us to apologize for it.

**Online version:** 我们可很吵, 也别指望我们会跟你道歉.

**Official version:** 我们很吵, 也不会道歉的.

Analysis: Judy settled in a small apartment with two noisy horses. In online version, “ke” was used as an adverb to enhance the degree of loveliness and childishness of the small horses. Moreover, “ye” is treated as a linking word that makes the whole sentence more logical. “Bie zhi wang” illustrates the naughty and mischievous young horse. When translating dialogues in the movie for small children, we should not only pay attention to the connections between words and phrases, but also follow the rule of “language personalization” which could be considered as one of the important characteristics in children's work. Enlightened by the Reception Aesthetics Theory, young kids are the “implied readers” in animated movies and it is readers that finally appreciate and judge the value of a work. To make the subtitles funny and natural for the implied readers, individualized language is highly recommended to be employed in subtitle translation.

Example 7: Birds don't just fly  
They fall down and get up  
Nobody learns without getting it wrong  
I won't give up, no I won't give in

Till I reach the end  
And then I'll start again

**Online version:** 没有不停留歇脚的飞翔,  
没有不跌倒受伤的成长。  
我不会放弃, 我不会认输。  
直到有一天卷土重来。

**Official version:** 曾经堕落才能学会飞翔,  
走过错路才能找到正途。  
不能放弃, 我绝不会停。  
道路的终点是我的起点。

Analysis: One cardinal feature of American animated films is that movies are always accompanied with popular English song. Language in children's song tends to be concise, rhythmic, and smooth with the adaption of four-character terms and rhetorical devices. The online version sounds light and joyful with the same rhythm, and the last sentence is simple and to the point. As for the second version, "Duo luo" conveys our desperation feeling which has no apparent evidence in the film, and the last sentence in this version is beyond children's knowledge background. From the perspective of reception aesthetics, emphasis should be laid on the feelings and comprehensive abilities of children who are the readers. Different from adults, children prefer rhythm which brings aesthetic pleasure to the ears. Translators should choose readable words and build readable sentences according to characteristics of children's thoughts and make the texts lifelike to the best of translators' abilities so as to stimulate children's imagination. In children's song translation, the application of rhythmic words and meaningful four-character terms could shorten the distance between the original text and the audiences.

### 2.3 On the Rhetorical Level

Rhetorical devices are commonly used in English-Chinese translation, and appropriate application of rhetorical devices will strengthen the contagiousness and attraction of the language and leave a strong impression on children.

Example 8: Nice costume, loser.

**Online Version:** 制服不错, 小兔崽子。

**Official Version:** 戏服不错, 小废物。

Example 9: Judy Hopps.

**Online Version:** 朱迪·霍普斯

**Official Version:** 朱迪·跳跳

Example 10: Me Benjamin Clawhause.

**Online Version:** 我, 大家都叫我豹警官。

**Official Version:** 我, 本杰明·爪豪斯。

Analysis: In Example 8, online version "Tu zai zi"—dual meanings of "Rabbit kid" and "Little bastard" in Chinese, fully shows the speaking style of the fox as a villain. It belongs to the rhetorical category of pun. In

addition, corresponding official version "Tiao Tiao" of the original Example 9 also adopts the trope of pun and repetition of syllables. It triggers in children's mind the scene of a hopping rabbit, thus giving open space for imagination and matching with children's characteristics. Likewise, in Example 10 the pun of "Bao Jingguan" which, through homophony of "Bao", blends the image of a leopard cop and a police official whom other animals can turn to. The online version in Example 9 "Huo pu si" applies strategy of transliteration. Additionally, the official version in Example 10 "Zhua hao si" uses strategy of liberal translation. All these three versions perfect the combination of visual and audio experience for the implied readers, adding the lively spirit and at the same

time infusing more interest and flavor of children for the whole film. Hence, as the dominant audience, children will show more interest in the film. In contrast, the alternative translated versions are quite obscure to understand. Therefore, it is suggested that names in animated kids' movie be addressed with domestication strategy to cater to the language conventions of children.

Example 11: Greasy walls. Rickety bed. Crazy neighbors.

**Online Version:** 油腻的墙, 摇晃的床, 疯狂的邻居。

**Official Version:** 油油的墙, 晃晃的床, 疯癫的邻居。

Analysis: Little Judy finds a great gap between the reality situation and dreamed situation when arriving at the apartment. Reduplicated words of "You you" and "Huang huang" in Chinese perfectly present a small rabbit in front of children and attract their interests. Child interests are the artistic reflection of sentiments of child languages that describe emotion, hue and interest. Reduplication words also add sentimental colors and interesting elements in translation. As the example goes that appropriate use of reduplicated words stands to be more close to children's talk and arouse their empathy, it is reasonable to say that translation of the children animation should cater to children's particular way of speaking.

Example 12: She hustled you good.

**Online Version:** 她居然把你给玩了!

**Official Version:** 好个智取。

Analysis: To enlist help from the fox, little Judy wittily uses his digital recorder to capture evidence of tax evasion against the fox. "Wan" (with frivolous touch in Chinese) in online version smack of ambiguous meaning, which is also inconducive to cultivating the implied readers' values; while the official version echoes to the former one when the fox bought the ice-lolly. Not only is it in accordance with the linguistic context, but also this expression retains its ironical touch in this context, making up for the blank space perfectly. As Firth proposed, every single word is a new one in a new context (Firth, 1957, p.173).

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## CONCLUSION

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In consideration of the characteristics of the film subtitle and children audience, it is required that translators acquire profound bilingual proficiency to better render the specialness of two different cultures implied in its corresponding language. Moreover, taking children as the implied readers into account, translators should give prominence to the following linguistic factors such as its naturalness, comprehensibility, sense of humor, vividness and so on. If needed, R-ending retroflexion, modal particles and reduplicated words are used to satisfy children's horizon of expectation. As regards to the translation strategies of the children animation, translators should mainly adopt literal translation supplemented by liberal translation. Linguistic contexts should be taken into full consideration. When necessary, they should adjust the sentence structure subtly while paying attention to the cohesion between sentences. And domestication in translation is encouraged in dealing with issues of culture. Above all, under the guidance of

Reception Theory, translators should update themselves with the latest cultural acquisition to keep pace with the times.

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