

Subtitling Cultural Specificity from English to Chinese

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Abstract

One of the big problems faced by translators is how to handle cultural specificity, since translation is commonly viewed as an interlingual communication as well as a process of cultural transfer. In translating cultural specificity, two approaches are usually proposed, a foreignizing method or a domesticating method. Subtitling, as one of the most common modes of audiovisual translation, has its own requirements and constraints, which centers on the target text as well as its reception by an audience of different characteristics and background from that of the original. To handle culture-specific terms in subtitling, a domesticating method is strongly advised, in line with which the strategy of adaptation is therefore suggested and then exemplified in subtitling as the dominant principle of dealing with cultural specificity, with a view to assisting viewers' comprehension and evoking an equivalent effect.

Keywords: subtitling, cultural specificity, adaptation, foreignization, domestication

1. Language and Culture

It is generally agreed that translation is not simply a matter of language, but primarily a cross-cultural transfer or intercultural communication. The probe into this type of intercultural communication is first beset by a major problem caused by the disagreement over the ambiguous and intriguing concept of *culture*. The definitions of *culture* amount to over 200, each from its own perspective. The one that is directly relevant to translation is given by Ward H. Goodenough, an American ethnologist, who maintains that culture refers to the forms of things that people have in mind, their models for perceiving, relating, and otherwise interpreting them (Nord, 1997). This view has served as a general starting point for functionalist approaches to translation, on the premise of which Vermeer accentuates the features of culture: 1) dynamic qualities, focusing on human action and behavior; 2) comprehensiveness, regarding culture as a complex system determining any human action or behavior, including language; and 3) the possibility of it being used as a starting point for a descriptive and explicative or prescriptive approach to culture-specificity (ibid).

Irrespective of the varied views of culture, translation theorists or linguists almost all agree upon the close link between language and culture. John Lyons (1968), an English linguist, holds that the lexical distinctions drawn by each language will tend to reflect the culturally-important features of objects, institutions and activities in the society in which the language operates. His view is echoed by Nida (1993), Vermeer and Mary Snell-Hornby (Nord, 1997), who also consider the language of a particular society as an integral part of its culture. In light of the close connection and interdependence between language and culture, it is not surprising that they are sometimes spoken of as a single entity —“languaculture” (Nord, 1997, p.25).

As translation is conceived of as an interlingual communication as well as a process of cultural transfer, translators are almost always required to be both bilingually and biculturally competent. For expert translating, biculturalism matters even more than bilingualism because words only have meanings in terms of the culture in which they operate and the understanding of the source-language text is influenced and conditioned by the culture. Unfortunately, the translator may be too locked into his own cultural way of thinking to be able to transcend the boundaries of his own cultural heritage into the world of the other.

Hence, the degree of difficulty and the quality of translation have more to do with culture than with language itself. This contribution, therefore, centers on the translation of cultural specificity and limits the discussion to the handling of culture-specific terms in subtitling.

2. A Contrastive Study of Cultures Involved in Translation

The translator's knowledge of the cultures concerned is based, consciously or unconsciously, on a comparative study of them. It is legitimate to say that translating means comparing cultures. The concepts of one's own culture will be used as the touchstones for the perception of otherness and the translator interprets source-culture phenomena in the light of his own culture-specific knowledge of that culture. Comparing cultures encompasses both cultural similarities and differences. Cultural similarities are what Wilss terms "universals" (Gentzler, 1993, p.58). It is just those cultural "universals" that provide a basis for mutual understanding and help the translator cross the cultural frontiers, which, in turn, makes translation and cultural exchange at all possible. However, cultural diversities or cultural conflicts are, after all, the major reasons for the breakdown of cross-cultural communication. Everything observed as being different from our own culture is specific to the other culture, whereas cultural difference, whether between language-pairs that are culturally closely related or those with only distant cultural connections, is one of degree and not of kind (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990).

Exploring cultural differences requires a more general classification of culture as the specific cultural phenomena are too numerous to be accounted for. However, the ways to categorize are no less varied than the definitions of culture. In a broad sense, culture is subdivided into *paraculture* (the norms, rules and conventions valid for an entire society), *diaculture* (norms, rules and conventions valid for a particular group within the society, such as a club, a firm, or a regional entity) and *idioculture* (the culture of an individual person as opposed to other individuals) (Nord, 1997). In a restricted sense, Newmark (1988) and Nida (1993) classify it into five groups: ecology, material, social, religious and linguistic culture. Anyway, classification may vary, but a systematic study of the differences is necessary in translation, especially between cultures whose connections are distant. The divide between Chinese culture and western culture ranks quite high with the greatest number of cultural factors subject to variation and the least commonality.

An example from the perspective of religion is cited in the following to show the cultural differences between Chinese and English. Here is a sentence from one of China's Four Great Classical Novels, *Dream of the Red Chamber* or *The Story of the Stone* (《红楼梦》): “谋事在人,成事在天”. Two English versions are provided by the Yangs (Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang) and David Hawkes respectively. The Yangs translate it as “Man proposes, Heaven disposes”, considering that in China it is Heaven (天) that governs Nature or other supreme deities in Buddhism, Taoism or Confucianism— three dominant religious and ethical systems in China. David Hawkes, a British Sinologist, renders it as “Man proposes, God disposes”, since many westerners profess Christianity and the supreme deity is God (上帝) in the west. Differences between the two cultures are well demonstrated in the example. Therefore, in translating, a contrastive study of the cultures involved and some necessary changes are called for to ensure that the translation is well understood and received by readers.

3. Subtitling

In audiovisual translation, a relatively new field of translation, subtitling is one of the most common modes and the focus of this contribution. Subtitling involves displaying written text, giving an account of the actors' dialogue and other linguistic information which form part of the visual image or the soundtrack (Díaz Cintas, 2006). Luyken et al. define subtitles as:

... condensed written translations of original dialogue which appear as lines of text, usually positioned towards the foot of the screen. Subtitles appear and disappear to coincide in time with the corresponding portion of the original dialogue and are almost always added to the screen image at a later date as a post-production activity. (Luyken et al., 1991, p.31)

Under the various definitions of subtitling given by different translation theorists, subtitling exhibits the following characteristics:

- a. Subtitling is a type of language transfer, one of the most common modes of audiovisual translation.
- b. Subtitles are transcriptions of film or TV dialogues, rendering seemingly oral source texts into written target texts and giving an account of the actors' dialogue as well as other linguistic information conveyed by the visual image and the soundtrack, such as letters, graffiti, captions and songs.
- c. Subtitles or the written target texts do not replace the source texts, but appear simultaneously on the screen, along with the picture sequence, synchronized with the original dialogue and the action.
- d. Subtitles, as lines of text, are usually placed at the bottom of the screen, immediately below the picture itself, or left-aligned (in some countries).
- e. Subtitles are run at a maximum speed of eight syllables per second for reading time (Nida, 2005), or with an average maximum length of 35 characters, usually consisting one or two lines (Gottlieb, 2005).

Generally, the distinctions of subtitles can be drawn on the basis of either linguistic or technical processes (Gottlieb, 2005). Linguistically, there are intralingual and interlingual subtitling. The former includes subtitling of domestic programmes for the deaf and hard of hearing and foreign-language programmes for language learners. This type takes speech down in writing, changing mode but not language. The latter transfers speech in one language to writing in another, thus changing both mode and language. Technically, two types can be distinguished: open subtitles and closed subtitles. Open subtitles, which are not optional, include cinema subtitles and interlingual television subtitles. Closed subtitles, which are optional, encompass television subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing and interlingual television subtitles transmitted by satellite. The subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing are selected by the individual viewer on a remote-control unit and generated by a decoder in the television set while subtitles transmitted by satellite allow different speech communities to receive different versions of the same programme simultaneously.

4. Translating Cultural Specificity in Subtitling

4.1. Methods of Translating Cultural Specificity

In translating cultural specificity, American translation theorist Lawrence Venuti in his *The Translator's Invisibility* once proposed two opposing strategies: *domestication* and *foreignization*. This proposition was influenced by German translation theorist Friedrich Schleiermacher, who argued that there are two different methods of translating: "Either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader toward him. Or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author toward him" (Schleiermacher, 1813/1992, pp.41-42). In his statement, to move the reader toward the author is the *alienating* strategy, whereas to move the author toward the reader is the *naturalizing* strategy. This distinction is manifested as that between *foreignization* and *domestication* in Venuti's theory.

Venuti's *foreignization* derives from Schleiermacher's *alienating* strategy, namely, "to move the reader toward the author", in which a cultural other is not erased but manifested in the target language. According to Venuti, such a translation means "a close adherence to the foreign text, a literalism that resulted in the importation of foreign cultural forms and the development of heterogeneous dialects and discourses" (Venuti, 2005, p.242). This strategy intentionally retains the foreign cultural elements and transfers them to the target text, thereby allowing the reader to experience the foreignness in the target-language culture, and, in a sense, sending the reader abroad. *Domestication*, on the other hand, fits in with Schleiermacher's conception of leaving the reader in peace and moving the author toward him. As Venuti states, such a domesticated translation

... whether prose or poetry, fiction or nonfiction, is judged acceptable by most publishers, reviewers, and readers when it reads fluently, when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent, giving the appearance ... that the translation is not in fact a translation, but the "original." (Venuti, 1995, p.1)

This strategy tends to iron out the cultural differences and provide readers with the experience of recognizing their own culture in a cultural other. It is "an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bringing the author back home" (Venuti, 1995, p.20). Such a translation features a fluent style, idiomatic and readable, easily acceptable to target readers.

4.2. Translating Cultural Specificity in Subtitling

4.2.1 Domestication recommended in subtitling

With respect to translating cultural specificity, the translator is allowed to choose between a domesticating method to bring the author home and a foreignizing method to send the reader abroad. In many cases, the foreignizing method, despite allowing readers to experience the other in the target culture, usually frustrates immediate intelligibility by employing stylistic peculiarities, such as the use of different registers, styles, wordplay, polysemy and opaque archaisms, and, therefore, poses a challenge to target readers. The problem is aggravated in subtitling, since subtitling, like most audiovisual translation modes, is primarily receptor-centered, in which viewers' response matters more, as Whiteman puts, "We should remember that the audience reaction to a funny line is far more important than any literal fidelity to the original sense" (Whitman, 2001, p.149). Here, *Skopos* theory is directly relevant, which explains this departure from the ST by maintaining that "a translation need not necessarily be retrospectively 'equivalent' to a source-text interpretation, but should be prospectively 'adequate' to a target-text skopos" (Vermeer, 1996, p.77). Domesticating strategy conforms to such a skopos, with the emphasis put on the target text as well as its reception by an audience of different characteristics and background. Therefore, domestication, with functional and sociocultural features, should be the dominant principle of transferring a cultural reference in subtitling.

4.2.2 Adaptation strategy in subtitling

The mode of translation usually limits the strategies available to translators. Tomasziewicz (1993) once discussed eight strategies in operation in film subtitling (see Figure 1) (Tomasziewicz, T. quoted in Pettit, 2009):

Strategies	How to do
(1) Omission	the cultural reference is omitted altogether
(2) Literal Translation	the solution in the target text matches the original as closely as possible
(3) Borrowing	original terms from the source text are used in the target text
(4) Equivalence	translation has a similar meaning and function in the target culture
(5) Adaptation	the translation is adjusted to the target language and culture in an attempt to evoke similar connotations to the original. Strictly speaking this can be considered a form of equivalence
(6) Replacement of the cultural term with deictics	particularly when supported by an on-screen gesture or a visual clue.
(7) Generalisation	neutralisation of the original
(8) Explication	a paraphrase to explain the cultural term

Figure 1 eight strategies in film subtitling

In film subtitling, more than one strategy might operate concurrently and of those eight strategies, some are source-oriented while others are target-oriented, viewed as the exponents of adaptation. In terms of cultural transfer, the strategy of adaptation (see strategy 5) is perfectly in line with the domesticating method. By Tomasziewicz's distinction, adaptation can be considered a form of equivalence, while equivalence, in his terms, refers to the translation that has a similar meaning and function in the target culture. Tomasziewicz's adaptation requires that the translation be adjusted to the target language and culture in an attempt to evoke similar connotations to the original, bringing the subtitles firmly to the target culture (*ibid.*).

The strategy of adaptation in subtitling is like old wine in a new bottle, which has already been touched by early translation theorists. In a flattened V diagram (see Figure 2) proposed by Peter Newmark (1988/2005, p.45), adaptation is the "freest" form of translation and reaches its extreme limit, with TL emphasis, in which the SL culture is converted to the TL culture and the text rewritten.

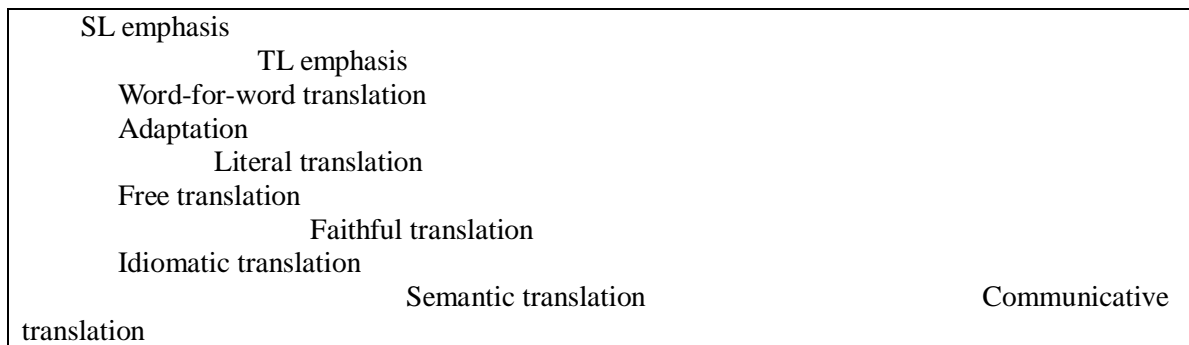


Figure 2 types of translation

Vinay and Darbelnet (2000) also elaborate on the strategy of adaptation, who hold that adaptation is used in such cases as the type of situation being referred to by the SL message is unknown in the TL culture, and translators have to create a new situation that can be considered as being equivalent, thus adaptation can be described as a special kind of equivalence, a situational equivalence. They give a well-known example in interpreting in which the cultural connotation of a reference in an English text to the game of cricket is adapted into French by a reference to the *Tour de France*, as both the SL situation and the TL situation refer to a popular sport in the countries concerned. Likewise, a similar situation in subtitling calls for the employment of adaptation strategy.

4.2.3 Procedures of adaptation

By Vinay and Darbelnet’s standard, adaptation operates on three levels: the lexicon, syntactic structures and the message which is used to mean approximately the utterance and its metalinguistic situation or context (Munday, 2001). Bastin, in a comprehensive study of adaptation, works out a more detailed list of the ways in which adaptations are carried out (see Figure 3) (Bastin, 2009). The exact procedures are:

Modes	Procedures
(1) transcription of the original	word-for-word reproduction of part of the text in the original language, usually accompanied by a literal translation
(2) omission	the elimination or implication of part of the text
(3) expansion	the addition or explicitation of source information, either in the main body or in a foreword, footnotes or a glossary
(4) exoticism	the substitution of stretches of slang, dialect, nonsense words, etc. in the original text by rough equivalents in the target language (sometimes marked by italics or underlining)
(5) updating	the replacement of outdated or obscure information by modern equivalents
(6) situational or cultural adequacy	the recreation of a context that is more familiar or culturally appropriate from the target reader’s perspective than the one used in the original
(7) creation	a more global replacement of the original text with a text that preserves only the essential message/ideas/functions of the original

Figure 3 procedures of adaptation

The specific motivation or condition which causes the decision to adapt is situational or cultural inadequacy where the context or views referred to in the source text do not exist or do not apply in the target culture. Hence the very mode of adaptation to be done in this respect is to achieve situational or cultural adequacy (see mode 6) by “the recreation of a context that is more familiar or culturally appropriate from the target reader’s perspective than the one used in the original” (ibid). The adaptation used in subtitling is more of a local nature, guided by principles of effectiveness and efficiency, limited to isolated parts of the source text, in order to deal with specific differences between the language or culture of the source text and that of the target text. In face of some sociocultural allusions or culture-specific terms, adaptation requires a good understanding of the source text signs and, if necessary, replacing them with target cultural references, with the result of a cross-cultural exchange fostered and the viewers’ comprehension greatly assisted.

5. Adaptation in Subtitling: Case Study

The strategy of adaptation seeks to domesticate or familiarize a message, especially, a message with distinctive cultural features or culture-specific conventions, in an attempt to achieve the equivalent effect. To exemplify this strategy in subtitling, four cases are cited from an animated film, a sitcom, a feature film and a television serial drama. The following cases illustrate how a free, target-culture recreation of the text complies with the needs of the target text audience.

Shrek is a 2001 American animated fantasy comedy film about the adventure and romance of a big, strong, intimidating ogre named Shrek and a beautiful, feisty Princess Fiona. One episode features that after Fiona is rescued by Shrek, unaware that he is an ogre, she fantasizes about being rescued by a handsome prince and flattered with some flowers and a poem, like in a fairy tale, thus, come the following witty exchanges between the two:

(1) (ST) Fiona: But we have to savor this moment! You could recite *an epic poem* for me. *A ballad? A sonnet? A limerick?* Or something!

Shrek: I don't think so.

(TT) 菲欧娜：咱们得好好享受此时此刻！你该为我吟首诗才对，律诗？绝句？古诗？什么都行！

史莱克：我可没那打算。

In example (1), Fiona mentions different types of poems, an epic poem, a ballad, a sonnet, and a limerick, which are specific to English tradition but unfamiliar to Chinese viewers. If rendered literally, the subtitles do not allow Chinese viewers enough time to ponder those types, resulting in the loss of humor that the exchanges originally intend. The subtitled version thus adapts those types to the ones that Chinese viewers are familiar with, namely, 诗(a poem), 律诗(seven-character octave), 绝句 (five-character quatrain), 古诗(ancient poem). Through the use of those adaptations, viewers' efforts are spared and the humor is retained that Fiona's fantasy is mercilessly spoiled by Shrek's honest answer that he has no intention to flatter her, with the same function achieved.

Example (2) is taken from an American sitcom *Friends*, which revolves around a group of friends in Manhattan, aired on the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) from September 22, 1994 to May 6, 2004. In Season 9 Episode 21, Phoebe and Rachel have a conversation about a purchase:

(2) (ST) Rachel: Oh, oh! Wow, I love those! When did you get them?

(TT) 瑞秋：哇！我喜欢这双鞋！哪儿买的？

(ST) Phoebe: I bought them off Ebay! They used to belong to the late *Shania Twain*.

(TT) 菲比：拍卖网站上，本来是已故顺子的。

(ST) Rachel: Phoebe, *Shania Twain* is still alive!

(TT) 瑞秋：菲比，顺子还活着。

(ST) Phoebe: Oh... then I overpaid.

(TT) 菲比：喔，那我被坑了。

In this example, Phoebe has bought a pair of shoes which used to belong to Shania Twain who she believes is already dead. Shania Twain is a Canadian country pop singer-songwriter, sometimes referred to as "The Queen of Country Pop", who has won five Grammy Awards and 27 BMI Songwriter awards. It is a popular belief that a late star's items are of great value, not to mention someone as famous as Shania Twain, so Phoebe boasts her good buy before Rachel, but Rachel reveals the truth that she is deceived and overcharged because Shania Twain is still alive. But the Chinese viewers may have little knowledge of this famous pop singer and the relevant cultural background. The mention of her name, consequently, does not evoke a similar effect, resulting in the loss of humor. In the subtitled version, therefore, Shania Twain is replaced by a pop singer in China 顺子(Shunzi) who enjoys a similar status and the pronunciation of whose name is also similar, with the equivalent effect produced and the same function fulfilled.

Example (3) comes from a 1994 American epic romance film *Forrest Gump*, which depicts the life of Forrest Gump, a slow-witted yet athletically prodigious person who witnesses and even influences some of the defining events of the latter half of the 20th century. Forrest Gump once described his relation with young Jenny in the following:

(3) (ST) Forrest: From that day on, we were always together. Jenny and me
were like *peas and carrots*.

(TT) 阿甘: 从那天起我们总在一起, 就像秤不离坨。

In the original dialogue, the expression of *peas and carrots* is frequently used in the English world to describe the intimacy of two people who always go together, for peas and carrots which are green and red respectively are often used together in American households as furnishings for their staple food. This poses a challenge to Chinese viewers, however, since in Chinese culture, this combination is not so often seen in dishes, leaving the Chinese viewers at a loss. It is desirable to adapt the idiom to a Chinese one “秤不离坨” (The scale cannot work without a weight) which also signifies an intimate relation between two people in Chinese culture. This idiom derives from the use of a traditional Chinese balance scale, which is made of two arms of equal lengths, supplied with a weight placed on one arm, and a material to be weighed placed on the other. Hence the Chinese idiom: the scale (秤) cannot work without a weight (坨), conveying the same connotative meaning as *peas and carrots* and being well received by Chinese viewers.

Prison Break is an American television serial drama about two brothers: one has been framed and sentenced to death, and the other then devises an elaborate plan to help his brother escape prison. It was broadcast for four seasons, from 2005 until 2009. Example (4) is a conversation between Michael who devises the plan and an inmate named Cooper:

(4) (ST) Michael: The one you think I mean.

(TT) 迈克尔: 你知道我说的什么。

(ST) Cooper: Three days inside, and *he's already thinking about turning rabbit*.

(TT) 库珀: 才在牢里呆了三天, 就想着要大闹天宫了。

Here, Michael tries to talk Cooper into joining his escape plan, but Cooper does not take Michael seriously, thinking he is just a green hand with more audacity than wit. Used in this context, the original idiom “turning rabbit”, literally meaning “escaping”, conveys the following messages: Cooper implies that Michael is messing with the whole thing, shows contempt for Michael’s crazy plan and likens him to a rabbit that runs away very fast. If translated literally, it would seem plain without getting those implications across. The subtitled version, therefore, replaces the idiom with a Chinese allusion from *Journey to the West*, one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature. The novel is a fictionalized account of the Buddhist monk Xuanzang’s legendary pilgrimage to India, together with his three disciples, namely, Sun Wukong, Zhu Bajie and Sha Wujing. Sun Wukong, Xuanzang’s first disciple, possesses great magic power that matches the forces of all of the Taoist deities. He rebels against Heaven in unlimited hubris before being punished and becoming a disciple to Xuanzang. The Chinese allusion thus derived “大闹天宫” (Sun’s rebellion against Heaven), with the connotation of messing around successfully conveyed and the image of Sun, very popular with the Chinese, retained, producing a similar effect.

6. Conclusion

In subtitling texts with culture-specific terms, subtitlers often sway between two poles: to translate literally to convey the maximum cultural message or to adapt to the target-culture to evoke a similar effect. Due to the vast and striking differences between Chinese and western cultures, literalism in subtitling often brings detrimental effect, throwing the viewers into an abyss of bewilderment and, as a result, failing the purpose of translation. With the special nature of subtitling in mind, adaptation nowadays is gaining momentum though it still sparks debate occasionally, as in the newly-released films in China, *Men in Black III* (2012) and *Madagascar 3: Europe's Most Wanted* (2012), in which the subtitlers are doubted over the great liberty they have taken to subtitle the films.

Their subtitles are criticized for being too localized and naturalized by adding at their discretion many online expressions popular with Chinese netizens, like *playing a passer-by* (打酱油) and *illegal cooking oil* (地沟油), which once signified the social events of public concern in China, but at the expense of a radical departure from the original meaning. Irrespective of the dissenting voices, the principle of “while in Rome, do as the Romans do” helps to bridge the two worlds of the SL author and the TL receptor as well as the two worlds of different cultures. Targeted at the viewers’ responses and the market, this new trend of adapting foreign culture in subtitling is of great interest to translation scholars and worth further research.

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