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Skopos Theory-based Film Subtitle Translation: A Case Study of *The Truman Show*

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Abstract: With the development of film and television drama, subtitle translation is becoming more and more important. Research on subtitle translation in foreign countries started earlier, but it lagged behind in China. For a long time, subtitle translation was often regarded as a secondary task in film production rather than an independent research subject. This leads to uneven quality in subtitle translation, and it is urgent to conduct in-depth research on subtitle translation. Subtitles are constrained by limited screen space and short reading time, so translators must balance linguistic meaning, cultural connotation, and audience acceptance. This paper discusses the subtitle translation of *The Truman Show* from the perspective of Skopos Theory, and analyzes how the three principles of Skopos theory, namely Skopos Rule, Coherence Rule, and Fidelity Rule, guide translators to choose appropriate translation methods in order to improve the quality of translation, hoping to attract translators' attention to subtitle translation research and further improve the quality of subtitle translation in China.

Keywords: Skopos theory; Subtitle translation; Translation method

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, more and more film and television works are attracting attention from people. With the influx of a large number of foreign film and television works, film and television subtitle translation is becoming more and more important. Good subtitles can really shape how viewers experience a film. But in China, research on subtitle translation got off to a late start and still does not get the attention it deserves compared with other countries. When it comes to subtitles, one cannot really avoid Skopos theory. It grows out of German functionalist translation theory. The basic idea is simple: translation is driven by purpose. So it is not just copying—it is creating with a goal in mind. In film subtitles, every choice a translator makes has to do two things at once: stay true to the source and move the audience, while still getting the original meaning across. Skopos theory lays out three principles—purpose, coherence, and fidelity. Use them flexibly, and translators

can pick strategies more freely, bringing subtitles closer to viewers and making them hit harder. When subtitles land well, viewers follow the story more easily and feel it more deeply. The film also travels better across cultures. This paper uses Skopos theory as a starting point to look at the subtitle translation *of The Truman Show*. The goal is to get more people in China paying attention to film and TV subtitle research, and to push the quality of subtitle translation up a notch.

2. History and current situation of film subtitle translation

2.1. Research background

In recent years, research on film and TV subtitle translation has grown quickly, and more people are paying attention to it. Scholars have approached it from different angles: some look at strategies, some at effects, and others discuss its role in cultural communication. When it comes to translation theory, Skopos theory often comes up. It makes a basic point—translation activities do not just happen; there is always a purpose behind them. Put this point into film and TV subtitle research, and it can offer a relatively new analytical framework. This study follows that direction to see how Skopos theory works in subtitle translation. The questions it asks are fairly specific: How can subtitles be improved to be more usable? How can they reach viewers from different cultural backgrounds? And how can films use subtitles to support cross-cultural communication? In addition, it will analyze film and TV subtitles under the guidance of Skopos theory. As for the goal, it aims to test the theory's guiding value and also hopes that the overall quality of subtitle translation can be improved.

2.2. Current status of domestic research

China's film industry has been going strong for years now. This has made subtitle translation a hot research topic. Plenty of Chinese scholars are working on it, and they have produced quite a bit. Qian Shaochang is a big name in audiovisual translation. His view: dubbed films reach way more viewers than translated literature ever does. So audiovisual translation has strong social influence [1]. This shows its great value. Subtitles now play an increasingly important role. Chen Qing also stresses this point. Good subtitles help target viewers understand characters and film themes. They also support effective cross-cultural communication [2]. Good audiovisual translation should convey the original work's social context and cultural meaning. Translators should take subtitle translation seriously. They should use theory-based strategies to promote the source work. Scholar Gao Hong notes that subtitle translation has become essential for Chinese films' international reach. She analyzes Chinese film subtitle translation from intention, meaning, and formatting perspectives and puts forward several suggestions for reference [3]. Besides, Lü Yuyong and Li Min explore the phenomenon of entertainment-oriented rewriting in English-language film subtitle translation. They look at *Men in Black 3* and *Madagascar 3* as cases, and talk about what this rewriting is and how it works [4]. Their study shows entertainment-oriented rewriting is fairly common in Chinese subtitle translation. It is also making things harder for conventional audiovisual translation—translators cannot just ignore that. Liu Li'ai, though, starts from Skopos theory. She examines film subtitle translation and suggests some strategies to match, hoping to raise translation quality [5]. For translators trying to use Vermeer's Skopos theory in real audiovisual subtitle work, these findings are worth a look.

2.3. Current status of foreign research

Overseas audiovisual translation research took off in the 1990s. A lot of work appeared. Theoretical

frameworks also began to form. Early subtitle scholars mostly focused on basic definitions and features. Ivarsson and Carroll laid the foundation. They discussed the definition and history of subtitles, and practical problems too [6]. Later, audience expectations changed. Scholars shifted their focus. They began to look at different subtitle forms and audience reception. Chiaro and Moss used reception aesthetics. They examined how subtitles affect viewing experience and cultural acceptance [7]. Later still, Skopos theory and functional equivalence theory entered subtitle research. People started to care about translation's functions and purposes. Nord discussed how Skopos theory applies to real translation practice. Audiovisual subtitle studies were part of that [8]. These studies made academic understanding more detailed. They also gave translators theoretical support and practical strategies. So this paper starts from Skopos theory and studies *The Truman Show*. It hopes to offer some reference for improving film subtitle translation. It also hopes to draw more scholars' attention to this new field. It aims to get more domestic researchers working on audiovisual subtitle translation. In the end, it seeks to push domestic subtitle translation practice forward.

3. Overview of Skopos theory

3.1. Introduction to Skopos theory

Functional translation theory originated in Germany in the 1970s. German translation scholar Katharina Reiss held that an ideal translation should be a comprehensive communicative translation that matches the source text in conceptual content, linguistic form, and communicative function. However, in real translation practice, priority should be given to the functional features of the target text. Later, Hans Vermeer, a famous German translation theorist and Rice's student, put forward the "Skopos Theory." This theory helps translation studies get rid of the limitations of source text-centered research, emphasizing that translation is a purpose-oriented and result-oriented activity based on the source text and reached through negotiation. A series of rules must be followed in the whole translation process, among which the "Skopos Principle" has the heaviest weight. Functionalist translation theory regards the "Skopostheorie Principle" as the main criterion for evaluating translation activities. Every translation activity has a specific purpose, and subtitle translation is no exception. The goal of subtitle translation is to help the audience understand the content of the film and stimulate their interest in watching it. In addition to simple language conversion, subtitle translation also promotes cultural exchange and emotional resonance.

3.2. Three principles of Skopos theory

3.2.1. Skopos rule

Vermeer came up with the principle of purpose. It is the core of Skopos theory. In his book, he says every translation activity begins with a purpose, and that purpose guides it from start to finish [9]. Basically, the translator should pick a strategy based on what the target text is supposed to do in the target cultural context. So what really decides the strategy? Not the literal meaning of the source text. The purpose does. That means translators have to be clear about what they want their subtitles to achieve. Only then can they choose the right methods.

3.2.2. Coherence rule

Coherence and readability matter just as much. Nord explains the coherence principle this way: the target text has to make sense to viewers in the target cultural context [8]. Simply put, the translation should follow the

logic and context of the target language. That way, it reads smoothly and stays coherent. Under this principle, the translation needs to be logically consistent and semantically clear. It also has to fit the target language and target culture. Then the target audience can understand it without much trouble.

3.2.3. Fidelity rule

The faithfulness principle basically means the translation should stay faithful to the source text. Still, faithful does not mean word-for-word. Translators need to first get what the original is trying to say and what it is meant to do. If the core meaning and function are kept, the wording can be adjusted. That makes the translation fit the target culture's reading habits more naturally. Of the three principles, coherence and fidelity both come under the purpose principle. Skopos theory has kept developing since it was first put forward, and it offers important theoretical support for translation practice.

4. A study on subtitle translation of *The Truman Show* from the perspective of Skopos theory

4.1. Movie synopsis

The Truman Show is a 1998 American satirical comedy feature film. The film's protagonist, Truman Burbank, has been designed as a large-scale reality show since his birth, and he has been kept in the dark for a long time. Until the end, Truman saw through the scam, resolutely left to pursue their own real life. Based on the theory of teleology, the core goal of subtitle translation is to help the audience understand the plot of the film. Language and culture differ greatly between China and the UK. No single strategy can handle every dialogue. Translators should use different methods flexibly. These include literal translation and free translation. The aim is to balance fidelity to the original and readability for the audience.

4.2. Subtitle translation methods for *The Truman Show*

4.2.1. Literal translation

Literal translation is actually pretty common in film subtitles. One good thing about it is that it keeps the film's original language style. When viewers watch, they can also feel the real emotion and depth in it. It also helps with understanding the cultural background. It feels a lot like hearing the original dialogue directly. Another point: it can pass information along fairly accurately, so one does not lose the original meaning from too much rewriting. The subtitles stay clean and clear, so viewers can follow more easily and get into the film more easily. Now the study looks at a literal translation example from *The Truman Show*.

Example (1)

Truman: Good morning, and in case I don't see ya, good afternoon, good evening, and good night!

Translation: 早上好，噢，可能等会我们见不到了，那就祝午好、晚好、晚安！

Literal translation subtitle: " 早上好，如果我没看到你，下午好，晚上好，晚安！ "

This is what Truman said to his neighbors when he went out every day. The literal translation retains the humor and warmth of the original text and clearly conveys the original meaning. The language is fluent and natural, faithful to the original text, and conforms to the principle of faithfulness.

4.2.2. Free Translation

Not all subtitles are suitable for literal translation. When literal translation does not work, the translator

can adopt a free translation strategy. With the help of free translation, subtitles can be more in line with the culture and expression habits of the target language, reduce the audience's understanding burden, shorten the time required to interpret subtitles, and optimize the overall viewing experience. To sum up, free translation makes the subtitles easy to understand and helps the audience better understand the plot of the film. The following selected cases in the subtitles of *The Truman Show* are analyzed to examine the free translation.

Example (2)

Spencer: He won't hurt you.

Truman: I know. It's just me.

Translation: 它不会咬你的。

Translation: 我知道，可我就是怕啊。

The word "hurt" in the first sentence of the original text commonly means to cause harm rather than to bite. A literal rendering of this sentence would be "It won't hurt you." This line is spoken by the dog's owner when the dog lunges toward Truman. In Chinese, people rarely describe a dog's action as "harming someone." Therefore, the translation " 它不会咬你 " is adopted to conform to Chinese expression habits and sound more natural. As for "I know. It's just me," it is translated as " 我知道，可我就是怕啊 ." If translated literally as "I know. This is just me," audiences would feel confused and unable to grasp the meaning. Even attentive viewers would need extra time to infer its implication, which fails to meet the requirements of subtitle translation. The free translation conveys the original meaning, ensures smooth transmission of information, and improves the viewing experience. It satisfies both the coherence rule and the Skopos rule.

Example (3)

Meryl: Truman, you've studied enough.

Translation: 楚门，你也该歇歇了。

The literal translation of this sentence is "Truman, you've learned enough." This line comes from Meryl's mouth, when Truman was studying in the library, she tried to invite him out for a drink. However, she did not mean that Truman had completed his studies and did not need to continue, but wanted to give him a little rest. Therefore, free translation is adopted to convey the deep meaning of the original sentence. The translation is natural and fluent, which is closely connected with the plot before and after the film. It not only conforms to the principle of coherence, but also maintains the principle of fidelity.

Example (4)

Angela: I see him 10 times a week in 100 different faces.

Translation: 我常把路人看成他。

This line comes from Truman's mother. When Truman tells her about the strange encounter, running into his father on the street, his mother comforts him and tells him not to overthink it. She says she often mistakes strangers for Truman's father. A literal translation of her line would be "I see him ten times a week in a hundred different faces." For one thing, this literal rendering is too long. For another, the meaning is still vague, which creates barriers for viewers and greatly hurts the viewing experience. By contrast, the free translation "I often mistake passers-by for him" is much more concise and clear. It stays true to the intention of the source text, makes the dialogue clear, and reads smoothly, which complies with the coherence rule.

Example (5)

Marlon: You okay? You look like shit.

Translation: 你还好吗？脸色好差。

This sentence was handed down by Truman's best friend Marlon. Truman began to notice some strange things around him and felt panicked. He turned to Marlon, hoping to tell him about these incredible events. When Truman hurried in and looked nervous, his face looked pale. At this very moment, Marlon said this: "Are you OK? You look like you're dying." This translation method is not appropriate, as it will destroy the atmosphere of the scene and conflict with the plot. Therefore, the adoption of a free translation of "You look terrible" not only meets the requirements of translation, but also follows the principle of fidelity in Skopos theory.

4.2.3. Amplification

Amplification translation is a widely used technique in subtitle translation. It helps the audience of the target language better understand the deep meaning of the source text by carefully selecting and inserting additional words. Although this technique adds new textual elements, these additions do not deviate from the core information of the original. On the contrary, they make subtitles more in line with the cultural background and language habits of the target language. The following is an example of the specific application of amplification techniques in the subtitle translation of *The Truman Show*.

Example (6)

Props, make sure the coffee's hot.

Translation: 把小狗牵出来，保证咖啡是热的。

This scene takes place while Truman is driving to work. The director directs all actors to get into position and prepare props over the broadcast, for Truman is about to arrive. The word "props" refers to stage properties here. A literal rendering, "Props, make sure the coffee is hot," would be vague and confuse viewers. By means of amplification, the translator specifies what these props are and adds the verb "lead." This makes the meaning clear and the sentence smooth, complying with the coherence rule.

Example (7)

Truman: I think I'm mixed up in something.

Marlon: Mixed up in what?

Translation: 我可能被卷入了一场阴谋。

马龙 : 什么样的阴谋 ?

Marlon asked: "What is mixed in?" Literally, this means "Mixed up in what?" But in this way, the original sentence is still vague. Therefore, the translator uses the addition method to add the noun conspiracy to explain what, that is, the conspiracy discussed by Truman. This additional word makes the sentence clearer and enhances the coherence between the preceding and the following sentences. This kind of translation conforms to both the principle of faithfulness and the principle of coherence.

4.2.4. Omission

As an important technique in subtitle translation, omission allows the translator to remove redundant or unnecessary words in the target language. In this way, the translation will be more concise and easy to understand. The following is a specific example of the application of omission in the subtitle translation of *The Truman Show*.

Example (8)

Truman: Would you want to maybe, possibly, sometime go out for some pizza or something?

Translation: 想跟我去吃点披萨或别的什么吗？

"Maybe," "possibly," and "sometime" in this sentence are adverbs conveying uncertainty and informality. Such repetitive synonyms are commonly used in spoken language for emphasis, yet they may become redundant in subtitles and hinder the clarity and flow of information. Truman wants to invite Lauren, the girl he likes, to grab some food. Deleting these repetitive expressions does not change the original meaning. It also saves subtitle space and adheres to the coherence rule.

Example (9)

Lauren: You know, Truman, I'm not allowed to talk to you.

Translation: 楚门，他们不准我和你讲话。

The "You know" in the original sentence does not really carry any substantive meaning. Leaving it out in translation saves subtitle space and cuts down the audience's reading time. The sentence structure still holds, the original meaning comes through clearly, and the expression flows better. So the subtitles presented this way fit both the faithfulness principle and the coherence principle.

5. Conclusion

This paper takes Skopos theory as its framework to examine how film subtitles should be translated. It draws on a number of examples. Skopos theory offers fairly clear guidance: translators can select strategies with some flexibility, so that the target text remains both faithful and coherent. The case studies further suggest that a range of methods are available, including literal translation, free translation, and other techniques, all of which help viewers understand the film. Translators are expected to observe three rules: the coherence rule, the fidelity rule, and the Skopos rule. They should also recognize how these rules relate to one another and apply them flexibly. In this way, subtitle quality can be improved.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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