

A Model of Subtitling Translation from a Sociosemiotic Approach

Biyun Zhang*

School of Foreign Languages, Yan'an University, Yan'an, Shaanxi, China

yadx_zhangbiyun@yau.edu.cn

*Corresponding author

Keywords: Subtitling Translation, Sociosemiotic Approach, Designative Meaning, Linguistic Meaning, Pragmatic Meaning

Abstract: With the proliferation of modern information and the advancement of communication technology, people are provided with millions of imported movies and foreign TV series, among which American ones are most popular owing to their exciting stories, admirable directors and excellent players. In addition, some Chinese audience regard them as an effective way to improve their English and learn about American culture at the same time. Hence the subtitling translation of these series has drawn wide attention. This study investigates how sociosemiotic approach is applied in subtitling translation of American TV series, proposes corresponding translation strategies from a sociosemiotic perspective, thus pointing out that in subtitling translation, translators must transfer designative meaning, linguistic meaning and pragmatic meaning of the characters' dialogues appropriately. This research is expected to be of some benefit for both professional and amateur translators in their subtitling translation and draw attention to the emerging importance of a theoretical research into subtitling.

1. Introduction

As a key component of foreign movies, screen translation is gaining momentum by both the translators and the audience. The two most common forms of screen translation are dubbing and subtitling. By definition, to dub a film is to “provide (a motion-picture film) with a new sound track (as for substituting dialogue in a foreign language)”, while a subtitle is “a printed translation of the characters' dialogues appearing near the bottom of the screen of a motion picture” or “a printed statement or fragment of dialogue appearing between the scenes of a silent motion picture” [1]. Dubbing is oral; it is one of a number of translation methods which make use of the acoustic channel in screen translation. Subtitling is visual, involving the superimposition of written text onto the screen.

Subtitling seems to be justified by virtue of cost, more economical, and execution speed compared with dubbing which requires the participation of more professionals. Many film fans, especially the Internet addicts, usually prefer the subtitled versions instead of the dubbed ones, because they just want everything to be original and prompt to fit their curiosity. Moreover, they cannot wait for the official dubbed versions or the DVD versions which are accessible after a long period of censorship. Another important incentive is the desire to learn a foreign language and get to know foreign cultures. The above-mentioned reasons lead to the boom of subtitling on the Internet. And because of this, the present study explores subtitling translation of American TV series.

2. A Sociosemiotic Approach to Translation

All signs are used to convey meanings. Translation relates to the transfer of meanings from one type of sign to another. Hence semiotics and translation share the same task of exploring the meaning of language. Translating is more a sociosemiotic interaction than merely an activity of verbal communication, thus semiotic theory can be applied to translation studies [2].

According to Morris's semiotic theory, language signs consist of three meanings: designative meaning, linguistic meaning, and pragmatic meaning [3]. The designative meaning indicates the relationship between the sign and its object; the linguistic meaning indicates the relationship between signs themselves; the pragmatic meaning indicates the relationship between the sign and sign user or interpreter, and this is the basic meaning that contains cultural information.

Translation studies based on sociosemiotics enable translators to interpret the meaning of words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and texts; moreover, it can help them to comprehend the symbolic meaning. This paper, based on Morris's theory of the three dimensions of semiotics, will explore the transfer of the three meanings, namely designative meaning, linguistic meaning, and pragmatic meaning in subtitling translation versions.

An utterance said by a character in TV series may have only one or more than one kind of meanings. A translator's task is to convey these meanings appropriately in the translation version. Normally designative meaning is the essential element to be conveyed, while in literary translation, the transfer of linguistic meaning is of vital importance; the transfer of pragmatic meaning must be given priority to that of designative meaning when it is impossible to convey the two in the same version.

3. A Model of Subtitling Translation from a Sociosemiotic Approach

Based on the sociosemiotic approach to translation, translation is translating meanings. Meanings and functions are not separable. If the meanings of the original are reproduced in the target language, the functions will be retained, too. That is to say, the fulfillment of functions is based on the transfer of meanings. Therefore, in translation, priority should be given to the reproduction of the three types of meanings, namely, designative meaning, linguistic meaning and pragmatic meaning.

3.1. Transfer of the Designative Meaning

The designative meaning or referential meaning of language signs is built upon the relationship between the sign and its object. It is the basic meaning of language carried by language signs and is often thought of as "dictionary meaning" [4].

In seeking the counterpart in the target language on the level of the designative meaning, translators may face three cases of correspondence: full correspondence, partial correspondence and non-correspondence. Partial correspondence means the designative meaning of a word in source language (SL) and that of a word in target language (TL) partly coincide. Non-correspondence means a word in SL has no correspondence in TL. In the cases of full correspondence, literal translation can convey both the literal meaning and designative meaning. But in the cases of partial or non-correspondence, literal translation does not hold because of the difference between the literal and designative meaning.

Hence, when both the designative and literal meanings of SL signs are the same as TL signs, literal translation can be employed; if they are in partial or non-correspondence, literal translation plus explanatory notes or free translation is applicable.

3.1.1. Literal Translation

Literal translation is widely used to achieve a high degree of cultural exchange, usually when the referents of the source language culture are identical with the referents of the target language culture, and the relationships between the signs and the referents they signify are the same. Under this situation, literal translation will be employed.

Example 1 Hotch: You know how Chris felt about his brother-in-law?

(*Criminal Minds*, S1E07)

Hotch: 知道 Chris 对他法律上的哥哥是怎么感觉的么?

The compound word "brother-in-law" is defined as "the brother of one's husband or wife; the husband of one's sister; the husband of the sister of one's husband or wife", which refers to 内兄,

内弟，大伯，小叔；姐夫，妹夫；or 连襟 in Chinese. Considering the story of the series, “brother-in-law” in this sentence should be translated literally into 姐夫, and the whole sentence into 知道 Chris 对他姐夫什么感觉吗？

3.1.2. Literal Translation Plus Explanatory Notes

It is often found that literal translation cannot make the translated text comprehensible to the target reader. Whenever pure literal translation does not work well, additional explanation in notes or other forms may do a good job. Notes are of special significance especially when there are cultural values involved in the original.

Example 2 Dr. Hofstadter: It’s certainly something I could never do with my husband.

Sheldon: I was hesitant the first time I tried it, but I experienced an unanticipated and remarkable release of endorphins. It’s quite satisfying.

(*The Big Bang Theory*, S2E15)

Dr. Hofstadter: 这绝对是我和我丈夫都没做过的事。

Sheldon: 第一次尝试时我也很犹豫，但我体验了一次未曾料到的大量的安多芬释放。非常令人满意。

As a theoretical physicist, Sheldon is undoubtedly a prodigy. Now he is having a talk with Dr. Hofstadter, his roommate Leonard’s mother, who is also a serious scholar just like him. The way they talk in the above dialogue may mislead the audience to something concerned with love affair; yet as the conversation goes on, it turns out that what they are talking about is that Sheldon is appealing to carry out a neuroscientific research in Dr. Hofstadter. In the dialogue, Sheldon describes the feelings when he got his brain scanned for the first time as “an unanticipated and remarkable release of endorphins”. To fully understand the comic air of the dialogue, above all, one should know what “endorphin” is. It is a neurochemical, occurring naturally in the brain and having analgesic properties that bind to pain receptors and so block pain sensation. In such cases of infrequently seen specialized terms, literal translation plus explanatory notes may be an ideal method. Hence a better translation version of the sentence “but I experienced an unanticipated and remarkable release of endorphins” can be 但我体验了一次能产生快感的安多芬释放，始料不及，石破天惊.

3.1.3. Free Translation

When literal translation cannot convey the designative meaning of the SL text, free translation is applicable. There are many cases where literal and designative meanings do not coincide. That is to say, when the same form of a sign cannot express the same content, the translator has to find a different sign that expresses the same meaning at the cost of the form.

Example 3 Lincoln: You know it’s dangerous, Michael.

Michael: But the die was cast, I could not go back.

(*Prison Break*, S4E01)

Lincoln: Michael, 这事太危险了。

Michael: 但是骰子已经掷出去了，我不能回去了。

After escaping from prison, Michael and Lincoln, for the purpose of clearing their names, have to steal Scylla, a computer hard drive storing all the information of the Company’s operations. This conversation occurs when Michael decides to retrieve Scylla. In the above translation version, what Michael says is rendered into “但是骰子已经掷出去了，我不能回去了”，which may mislead the Chinese audience to have a feeling that Michael had been gambling and after the dice were cast, he was unable to go back home or anywhere else. But in fact, the sentence has nothing to do with gambling at all. It means “after the decision has been made, there is no room for him to regret”. Obviously, the designative meaning is completely different from the literal meaning. so a reference translation version would be 但事已决定，不容反悔.

3.2. Transfer of the Linguistic Meaning

The linguistic meaning of language signs originates from the relationship between signs themselves. “Linguistic meaning must be carefully distinguished from other types of meaning, for the linguistic signification of a form does not refer to anything outside of language itself, as does referential or emotive meaning, but rather to the meaningful relationships which exist within language” [4].

Example 4 Marc: Oh, my God! Is that a sandwich? My stomach just rumbles emptyly.

(*Ugly Betty*, S1E07)

Marc: 老天！那是三明治吗？我快饿得不行了。

Onomatopoeia is frequently used in both Chinese and English to describe natural sounds so as to create an atmosphere. The use of onomatopoeia makes description objective, concrete and vivid. It creates auditory stimuli. So it is worth the translator’s efforts to maintain the effect.

Being a gay, Marc is very feminine. To translate this sentence, therefore, the translator should transfer not only what Marc says, but also how he says it. That is to say, the translator should pay close attention to Marc’s tone. The ideal method is to translate onomatopoeia into equivalent onomatopoeia in the target language. Hence a better translation version can be 我的肚子正饿得咕咕作响, which will vividly reveal Marc’s internal feelings and womanish characters. From this example, we can see that when dealing with the transfer of the linguistic meaning at phonetic level, the translators should try to translate onomatopoeia into equivalent onomatopoeia in the target language.

Example 5 Raj: Oh, sorry.

Leonard: No, you didn’t disturb us. We were just chewing the fat.

(*The Big Bang Theory*, S2E03)

Raj: 哦，对不起。

Leonard: 不，你没有打扰我们。我们正在吃东西。

In this scene, Leonard and Penny are having dinner in the room when Raj opens the door and enters. Being clear that Leonard has a crush on Penny, Raj utters “oh, sorry” as he is afraid that he spoils their fun. In the above translation version, the translator’s lack of cultural competence leads to the failure of conveying the character’s original meaning. Rather than “eating something”, the idiom “chewing the fat” actually means “having a casual chat”. Thus it is advisable to translate the sentence “we were just chewing the fat” into 我们只是在闲聊。

3.3. Transfer of the Pragmatic Meaning

Pragmatic meaning, which is also known as connotative meaning or associative meaning, is produced by the relationship between the sign and sign user. It is the impact of language signs upon human beings [2]. “Pragmatic meaning is not only negotiable but also highly variable across both linguistic and cultural divides” [5]. In translation practice, pragmatic meaning is of great help to guide the translators to deal with words with cultural connotation and the implied intention of the original author (that is, the implied meaning).

Example 6 Celia: Mammy, I apple!

Gaby: Wait a moment.

(*Desperate Housewives*, S5E02)

Celia: 妈妈，我要吃苹果！

Gaby: 等一下。

This conversation occurs between Gaby and her three-year-old daughter. The utterance “I apple” is said by the little girl whose language is still immature. So when translating this dialogue, the translator should pay special attention to the speaker’s age. Therefore, an advisable translation version of 吃果果 may well show this symbolic meaning. The symbolic relationship is established in the original sentence between the girl’s words 吃果果 and the symbolic meaning — her immature age. In the reference translation version, the correspondent symbolic relationship is established between ungrammatical sentence “I apple” and her immature age.

Example 7 Betty: I can't do a fashion magazine.

Justin: Told you so.

Hilda: Not helping!

(*Ugly Betty*, S3E09)

Betty: 我做不了时尚杂志。

Justin: 早跟你说了。

Hilda: 你没在帮忙。

In order to be qualified to attend a training class for successful magazine editors, Betty needs to do a magazine all by her own. At first she decides to do a fashion one, but all her family members tell her not to, for they are clear that Betty knows almost nothing about fashion, but Betty insists. After a series of obstacles and setbacks, Betty feels a bit discouraged and starts to doubt her ability. This conversation takes place just when Betty nearly loses heart. At that very moment, Justin's response "told you so" sounds rather cruel and harsh. So Hilda, Justin's mother and Betty's sister, stops her son by shouting out "not helping", which is literally defines as "not giving a hand", but actually means "shut up" in such a situation. With regard to the coherence of the whole conversation, translating "not helping" into 你住嘴 is a better choice to well show Hilda's anger towards her son for his disrespect and a second blow to his aunt Betty.

4. Conclusion

With an increasing number of audiovisual works introduced into China, more importance should be attached to the study of subtitling translation. In view of this, the present study undertakes an analysis of the subtitling translation of some American TV series within the framework of sociosemiotics. It can be concluded that when doing the subtitling translation, translators can apply the sociosemiotic approach from three aspects, namely, transfer of the designative meaning, transfer of the linguistic meaning and transfer of the pragmatic meaning. This study signifies that a sociosemiotic approach to translation can be regarded as a useful and effective theoretical framework within which the subtitling of television programs can be analyzed. Further researches will be conducted to test its applicability for other text types and genres.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my appreciation to Shaanxi Federation of Social Science Associations who granted me the Research Project on Major Theoretical and Practical Issues of Philosophy and Social Sciences in Shaanxi Province—"Image Building of Shaanxi and Construction of Ecological Civilization: Ecological Discourse Analysis of Shaanxi Films and TV Shows" (Post-grant Project)—that enabled this research.

References

- [1] Philip, B. G. (1986) *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*. Merriam-Webster Inc. publishers.
- [2] Wang, Z. J. (2007) *A Sociosemiotic Approach to Translation*. Beijing: Foreign Language Press.
- [3] Morris, C. (1938). *Foundations of the Theory of Signs*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- [4] Nida, E. (1964) *Toward a Science of Translation*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
- [5] Hatim, B. (1998). Text Politeness: a Semiotic Regime for a More Interactive Pragmatics. In Hikey, Leo. (ed.). *The Pragmatics of Translation*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd. 72-102.