A Relevance Theoretical Approach to Translators' Subjectivity in Subtitle Translation

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Abstract: While translation is always indispensable in international communication and exchange, the value of translators always seems to be underestimated. As an intermediary between the source and target language, translators can and should play their subjectivity in the translation practice. The translators' subjectivity can be further interpreted from a relevance theoretical approach. This theory believes that translators are responsible for leading the way of comprehension of the audience by building a most identical cognitive environment and avoiding misunderstanding. Translators also play the main role in the two ostensive-inferential communication processes between the author and the translator and between the translator and the audience. Specifically, this paper uses the relevance theory as a foundation to analyze how translators' subjectivity is manifested in subtitle translation. It picks out three examples from the lines of a popular American sitcom and finds out that translators do use amplification, conversion, and other strategies to make the ostension in the target language more acceptable for the Chinese audience. From the theoretical basis, the author also gives suggestions for optimizing the translation to retain the same comic effect.

Keywords: relevance theory; subtitle translation; translators' subjectivity; translation practice

1. Introduction

Internationalization and globalization have witnessed the surging importance attached to translation, which serves as a key medium for interlingual and intercultural communication. Translation and interpretation have become necessary tools for global exchange in political, cultural, economic, and other areas. With the development of translation studies, scholars are paying more emphasis on the translation of various types of texts, including recipes, subtitles, and advertisements, other than traditional focuses on literary works. In addition, continuous enrichment of people's spiritual entertainment brings about a surge of enthusiasm for films and TV series from other countries. Subtitle translation, as a special genre, then becomes a heated topic that attracts more attention.

Despite the integral position of translation, the role of translators did not receive appropriate attention until recent years. Though translators are the main executor of the translation practice, they are always regarded as "a piece of transparent glass", "a dancer with fetters", "the servant who serves two masters", and so on [1]. The capability of translators is somehow neglected and the translator's subjectivity is hidden behind the source text's author and the translated work's reader.

In the development of translation studies, various theories have been proposed to guide translation practices as well as evaluate translation output. In 1986, Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson first

published Relevance: Communication and Cognition, which discussed communication from a cognitive and pragmatic aspect and proposed the then popular theory – a relevance-theoretical approach [2]. As argued in this work, communication is an ostensive-inferential process and translation contains twice this process – between the author and the translator and between the translator and the reader. In the cognitive environments, the communicator is responsible for leading mutual assumptions [2], which, in the translation practice, emphasizes the subjectivity of translators, who should make assumptions about the readers' cognitive environment and avoid misunderstanding. Therefore, the relevance theory creates solid theoretical support for the study of translators' subjectivity. In subtitle translation, translators are required to both make the expressions easy to understand and to some extent retain the exotic charm of a foreign culture. They need to make what is manifest to the audience from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds almost the same despite their cognitive environments.

This paper will thus discuss the manifestness of translators' subjectivity in subtitle translation from the perspective of relevance theory. The structure is arranged as follows. After introducing the research background and significance, it sorts out relevant literature and theoretical development in Literature Review. Section 3 discusses the feasibility of the relevance theory to the subjectivity of translators in detail. The translators' subjectivity in subtitle translation is then analyzed from a relevance-theoretical approach in Section 4. Finally, the Conclusion summarizes the whole paper and reflects the limitations.

2. Literature review

Through the analysis of previous literature, this part aims to sort out the development and application of the relevance theory at home and abroad. It further collects and summarizes the exploration in subtitle translation. On the basis of relevant studies, it is able to identify current achievements and research status, from which the author figures out the existing research gap and contributes her own views.

2.1. Relevance theory

In 1975, Herbert Paul Grice, a British philosopher of language, further expanded his theory of implicature and cooperative principle in "Logic and Conversation". He proposed four categories under the cooperative principle: quantity, quality, relation, and manner [3]. The maxim of relation is "be relevant", on the basis of which, the relevance theory was developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson in their co-edited work *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* first published in 1986. They proposed the concept of cognitive environments and mutual manifestness and described communication as an ostensive-inferential activity. In the mutual cognitive environment, optimal relevance shall be pursued and the communicator is supposed to lead the assumptions so as to guarantee the effectiveness of the communication and comprehension [2].

This theory was first discussed in cognitive linguistics and pragmatics. It was gradually used in translation studies in the early 1990s, which began with *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context* written in 1991 by Ernst-August Gutt, a student of Sperber and Wilson. He argued that translation did not need to be guided by a distinct and general theory, instead, the interaction between the principle of relevance and contextual factors was enough to explain direct translation, indirect translation, and various principles and guidelines in translation [4].

Since then, the relevance theory has gradually drawn more attention from both the fields of linguistics and translation. In the meantime, Sperber and Wilson kept enriching and explaining this theory and further developed its cognitive principle and communicative principle [5]. It is used to study the attempted and sophisticated treatment of humor in language from a cognitive point of view

[6]. More scholars focused on its role in second language acquisition [7]. The relevance theory was even used to evaluate and guide the translation of biblical texts, such as theological interpretations, where metarepresentation was specifically used to analyze mental states and beliefs [8][9].

Much focus in Chinese studies has been paid to the application of this theoretical approach to problems in linguistic phenomena and translation practices [10]. On this basis, relevance theory also seeks its development in interdisciplinary fields, including psychology, neurosciences, pathology, informatics, and so on [10]. Compared with foreign studies, relevance theory in China is more widely used in analyzing translation strategies and the translation of various genres. Both Chinese to English and English to Chinese translations could follow the principles of the relevance-theoretical approach. It could even explain the translation of Chinese aphorisms and other culture-loaded materials [12]. Moreover, the journal Tea in Fujian used the relevance theory to guide the translation of tea names and tea-tasting activities, which could be conducive to the promotion of Chinese traditional tea culture [13].

2.2. subtitle translation

With the development of cultural communication and exchange, more attention has been paid to the translation of subtitles in movies, TV series, and sports shows. One or two decades ago, subtitle translation was mainly carried out by amateurs. Most of them are students and fans of western culture, who form non-profit clubs and translate the subtitles out of passion, hoping to promote their works. As a special genre, subtitle translation has its own features and there has been plenty of literature trying to find more suitable ways and strategies for subtitle translation, including how to deal with humor [14], culture-specific items [15], metaphors [16], and so on. These studies collected and summarized the commonly used translation strategies including transfer, paraphrase, deletion, and resignation. A great amount of research focuses on developing subtitle translation with the help of computers and explores the possibility and efficiency of using machine translation in subtitling [17].

Relevance theory is also among the theoretical approaches guiding the translation of subtitles. Bogucki discussed the threefold constraints in the process of subtitling and sorted out corresponding strategies, such as omission, modulation, transposition, and paraphrase, to achieve better relevance, which can lead to maximal comprehension and appreciation at minimal processing effect [18]. Based on the principles of the relevance theory, Zhang Lijun used specific examples to illustrate the skills used in the translation of film subtitles, including amplification, omission, domestication, and free translation [19].

Due to the traits of subtitles, its translation must be dealt with carefully and specifically, but the emphasis on this special genre seems insufficient. The group of subtitlers consists of professional and amateur translators and it is hard to carry out identical cultivation and training for these people. Therefore, it is of great significance to study and carry out proper means to guide the translation of subtitles on a certain theoretical basis, which shall make the subtitlers better perform their subjectivity and the translation can be better accepted by the audience.

3. Relevance theory and translators' subjectivity

Though it is not clearly stated by Sperber and Wilson, or others who propose and develop the relevance theory, this theoretical approach internally emphasizes the subjectivity of translators, which can be reflected in the concepts such as mutual cognition and ostensive-inferential process. This section discusses translators' subjectivity from a relevance theoretical approach and proves that translators play a decisive role in translation practice.

3.1. Cognitive environment

As argued by Grice, effective conversational communication requires both the speaker and hear to follow the cooperative principle, which was then developed into four Gricean maxims of quantity, quality, relation, and manner [3]. Intentionally or unintentionally utilization of this principle enables the hearer to receive a complete and unambiguous thought of the speaker from the incomplete and ambiguous expression of a sentence. To further explain how mutual understanding can be achieved, Sperber and Wilson introduced the concepts of cognitive environments and mutual manifestness [2]. The physical environment where a person stays and his/her own cognitive ability together build the total cognitive environment. It is easy to infer that because people can hardly be capable of becoming aware of the same facts, constructing identical cognitive environments is more likely to be a simple assumption, which is more obvious in translation practices where the author of the original work, the translator, and the reader of the translation are in different physical environments and can hardly predict each other's cognitive ability.

Having coordination on the choice of code and context is necessary to achieve successful communication. Relevance theory believes that the communicator should be responsible for correctly assuming what kind of codes and contextual information the receiver will possibly use in their comprehension. If translation practice is also regarded as a communication process from the translator to the readers of the translation, it is the translator that has to properly predict the readers' cognitive environment (especially when it's much different from that of the author) and use appropriate expressions to avoid misunderstanding. On the one hand, the translator needs to first find the mutual cognitive environment shared between himself/herself and the author of the source text, which is the only way to thoroughly understand the original representations and implicatures. On the other hand, the translator has to be fully aware of the physical environment and cognitive ability of the target readers to the translated work, without the knowledge of which, he/her will not be able to build a mutual cognitive environment and bring information mutually manifest. This is how translators' subjectivity is reflected in the translation practice. They are not only required to dig into the author's implicature in the original contextual information but are also responsible for leading their readers to a correct way of understanding.

3.2. Ostensive-inferential communication

Sperber and Wilson proposed in Relevance: Communication and Cognition that people intended to process information and carry out meaningful communication [2]. The principle of relevance believes that one's thoughts could be uncovered from words because people tend to focus on what seems most relevant to them. The communicator's ostension and the audience's inference together build the process of ostensive-inferential communication.

The translation practice is believed to consist of two ostensive-inferential processes. The first is between the author of the original work and the translator, while the second is between the translator and the reader of the translation. As an indispensable part of both processes, the translator has to unavoidably complete the tasks of inference and ostension and connect the two processes together. This is how the translator's subjectivity is manifest in the ostensive-inferential communication as argued from a relevance-theoretic approach. Since the coded communicative behavior generally involves two layers of information – a basic layer of information and a second layer that contains the information intended to manifest in the first layer, the translator needs to infer the hidden information from the author's ostension and make sure the reader is most likely to infer his/her ostension. This activity is only applicable when all parties shall follow the principle of relevance, among whom the translator takes the most responsibility.

4. Manifestation of translator's subjectivity in subtitle translation

Translators' subjectivity is especially reflected in the translation of literary works, including poems and novels. Subtitles, as a special genre, also require the translators to use their subjective initiative to make the translation acceptable. In particular, the characters in TV series are likely to use slang or idiomatic expressions in their communication, which sometimes may be impossible for an audience from another cultural and linguistic background to understand. To analyze the manifestation of translators' subjectivity in subtitle translation, this paper takes *Friends*, a worldwide popular sitcom, as an example. Representative lines are picked out for detailed discussion about how the translator has managed to carry out successful ostensive-inferential communication with the audience and make the translated subtitles easy to understand in a different cognitive environment.

Friends is an American sitcom describing the daily life of six friends. Their conversation is casual and colloquial, which always contains puns, slang, and metaphors to amuse the audience. This paper takes three examples from the lines of Friends and discusses their translation.

1. Chandler: You should live with Joey. Rolos everywhere.
   钱德勒：那你应该跟乔伊住 到处都有巧克力糖

Rolo is a chocolate brand developed in the UK. It can be seen anywhere in western countries and was even honored as one of the most popular and famous confectionaries. However, this brand is hardly known in China and is not in the cognitive environment of the Chinese audience. If the translation keeps the name Rolo or transliterates it into Chinese, it may still confuse the Chinese audience since they have no idea what it is. Therefore, instead of using the name of the brand, the translator takes the name of its product – chocolate, making it able to be understood by the Chinese audience.

2. Rachel: Oh, my God. Look at these pelts!
   瑞秋：天啊 好漂亮的毛皮大衣

In this sentence, the ostension is a command to turn one's attention to the clothes, but what is behind this is an exclamation of the beauty of the fur and her love for it. Due to the different habits of expression, such ostension in Chinese will possibly not lead to the same inference. "看看这件大衣" is definitely an expression of translationese. Therefore, the ostension is changed and the implicit exclamation is expressed directly. Combined with the actor's facial expression and action, the audience could better feel the emotion of the character.

3. Phoebe: Clean places?
   Joey: Umm, yum!
   菲比：去干净的地方怎么样？
   乔伊：好吃才怪！

In this scene, they were talking about Phoebe's date, a restaurant health inspector who kept shutting down their favorite places because of hygienic problems. Joey complained about having no place to eat and Phoebe suggested they find clean places. Although Joey said "Yum", considering his weird tone and facial expressions, he did not mean it. It can be assumed that according to the character setting and contextual information, the audience should have the cognitive ability to discover his irony. In order to avoid misunderstanding, the translator chooses to reveal the actual meaning of Joey, which, to some extent, reduces the comic effect. This line could be translated as "那可太好吃了", which retains the ironic expression and the Chinese audience will make the same inference as that in English.

5. Conclusion

To better understand the position and importance of the translator, this paper discusses the translator's subjectivity in subtitle translation from the perspective of Wilson and Sperber's relevance theory. The concepts proposed by this theory agree with the subjective function of the translator. People's cognitive environment depends on their physical environment and cognitive ability. Different cultural backgrounds and linguistic habits will further differ Chinses audiences' ways of thinking from Westerners. Translators are responsible for making the translation most likely to be understood by Chinese audiences so that they are able to acquire the most relevant information hidden in the second layer according to the mutual manifest. Since the translation practice can be regarded as a twice ostensive-inferential communication process, the translator has to first gain the correct inference from the author's ostension and then carry out the ostension in the target language in a way that the audience can also infer the information as intended by the author. To further illustrate translators' subjectivity in subtitle translation, this paper picks out three examples from a popular American sitcom – Friends, the lines in which are vivid and colloquial. These lines are not translated directly. Instead, the translator has used certain translation strategies, such as amplification, to build a familiar cognitive environment for the audience and make the ostension in the target language easy to understand.

This paper takes a relevance theoretical approach to analyze the subjectivity of translators. In particular, it discusses how translators subjectively handle the ostension in the target language in subtitle translation. Several examples are used to illustrate specific subtitling practices and find related translation strategies. Due to the limited time and space, this paper only takes three examples from the characters' lines. In future works, more strategies in subtitle translation that reveals translators' subjectivity can be sorted and discussed. The education and training of subtitlers, which group is made of professional and amateur translators, is also worth researching.

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