Research on English Translation of Movie Subtitles - Based on the Analysis of the Movie “Mulan”

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Abstract. The English translation of movie subtitles is vital for cross-cultural communication in films. Analyzing the translation of the movie "Mulan" allows for an understanding of the challenges faced in conveying cultural elements, character traits, and plot nuances. This research explores effective translation strategies and techniques, considering factors like humor, slang, and language styles. Evaluating audience feedback further enhances subtitle quality. By focusing on "Mulan," this study aims to improve the accuracy, readability, and naturalness of English movie subtitle translations. This study is based on the film "Mulan" and explores the English translation of film subtitles. Firstly, the background and content of the film are introduced to provide the context for the research. Subsequently, the study focuses on translation strategies for film subtitles and the societal issues present within them, such as gender inequality and stereotyping of women. By analyzing examples of direct translation, adaptation, and subtitles that showcase gender inequality, the challenges and solutions in the translation process are revealed. Based on this analysis, some translation approaches are proposed with the aim of conveying the theme of gender inequality in the film more effectively and reducing the emphasis on female stereotypes. Through the analysis and discussion of this study, theoretical and practical guidance is provided for film subtitle translation and serves as a reference for translating films that address societal issues.

Keywords: Movie Subtitle Translation, Gender Inequality, Stereotypes of Women, Translation Strategies, Mulan.

1. Introduction

The research background for this study encompasses the field of film translation, with a particular focus on the translation of subtitles in the context of the movie "Mulan" [1, 2]. The film industry has experienced remarkable growth on a global scale, necessitating effective translation methods to bridge language and cultural gaps for international audiences [3, 4]. Subtitling serves as a prominent approach to translating films, enabling viewers to comprehend dialogue and follow the storyline [5]. Among the various films that have undergone translation, "Mulan" emerges as a compelling subject of investigation due to its cultural significance and the themes it addresses, specifically those related to gender inequality and empowerment [2].

Consequently, analyzing the English translation of the film's subtitles provides valuable insights into the challenges and strategies involved in effectively conveying these themes to a diverse global audience [2, 3]. The research topic at hand centers on examining the translation strategies employed in the English subtitles of "Mulan" and their influence on conveying the theme of gender inequality and female empowerment [6]. By closely analyzing the choices made during the translation process, including literal translation, free translation, and cultural adaptation, a more profound understanding can be gained regarding how these strategies shape the audience's interpretation and reception of the film [3].

Adopting a textual analysis methodology, this study analyzes the English subtitles of "Mulan" in detail. By closely examining the specific translation techniques employed, such as functional equivalence, cultural adaptation, and the utilization of idiomatic expressions, the effectiveness of these strategies in conveying the intended meaning, cultural nuances, and thematic elements of the film can be assessed [6].

The significance of this study extends to both theoretical and practical domains. Theoretically, it contributes to the field of translation studies by providing insights into the translation strategies

employed in film subtitles, particularly when dealing with complex social issues like gender inequality [4]. By examining the translation choices made in "Mulan", this research sheds light on the broader implications of film translation and its impact on cross-cultural communication and understanding [6]. From a practical standpoint, the findings of this study serve as a valuable resource for translators and filmmakers, offering guidance on how to effectively translate and convey societal issues through film subtitles [7].

2. Mulan Movie

2.1. Introduction to the Mulan Movie

In order to attract international audiences, the film has adjusted the script and added elements that are easier for international audiences to understand and accept. At the same time, internationally renowned actors and production team members were recruited to enhance the appeal of the film. The filmmakers devoted significant resources to marketing and publicity around the world, including showings at film festivals, releasing trailers, and using social media for advertising [2]. The group work with international distribution companies to ensure a wide global distribution of the film. At the same time, multilingual versions have been produced to meet the needs of different audiences. These efforts and strategies have enabled "Mulan" to successfully gain recognition and success in the international market.

"Mulan" is an ancient Chinese legend that tells the extraordinary journey of a young woman named Mulan. In the story, Mulan is a clever and courageous girl who lives in a strict military family. When the northern invaders invade China, each family is required to provide one man to join the army and resist the invasion. Due to her father's frail health, Mulan decides to take his place and disguises herself as a man. To protect her identity, Mulan hides her true gender and joins the army as a man. She undergoes rigorous training and demonstrates remarkable combat skills and leadership abilities on the battlefield, earning the respect of her comrades.

Throughout her journey, Mulan must overcome her inner struggles while facing the risk of being exposed. She forms deep friendships with her companions and also captures the attention of her superior officer, Commander Tung Yung. As the battles progress, Mulan gradually reveals her true strength and courage, becoming a true warrior. In a decisive battle, she unveils her true identity and leads her comrades to defeat the northern invaders. Her bravery and dedication are praised as heroic, and she receives recognition from the Emperor.

In the end, the movie concludes with Mulan's triumphant return and the warm welcome of her family. Overall, "Mulan" tells a story of female empowerment and resilience, emphasizing the importance of bravely pursuing one's ideals and believing in oneself to overcome difficulties.

2.2. Social Problem

The story of "Mulan" is set in traditional Chinese society, where there were clear limitations on the expectations and roles of women. The film portrays several aspects of gender inequality and stereotypes. Firstly, society's expectations of women primarily focused on getting married, having children, being obedient, and serving their families. This idea is reflected in Mulan's family and community, where she is expected to behave and make choices within traditional female roles. Secondly, men were given more power and opportunities, and were generally seen as more capable and better suited for military and leadership positions. In the army, Mulan faced gender discrimination and unfair treatment as a woman. Thirdly, the film depicts stereotypes of men's perceptions of women's appearance, behavior, and abilities, such as male evaluations of contemporary women's capabilities and personalities in the military camp and General Dong's doubts about Mulan's abilities in the army.

In the movie "Mulan," the purpose of setting the character of the witch is not only to increase interest but also to contrast with Mulan. In the film, the title of "witch" itself is a derogatory term for women, reflecting the stereotypes and insults towards women. The role of the witch is used to reflect

the low status of women at that time [2]. In the film, the witch Xianniang helps the Rouran attack the Northern Wei because Böri Khan can help her gain recognition and status, so as to get rid of the situation of being exiled. She pursues the recognition and attention of others, which makes her a somewhat sad character. In her conversation with Böri Khan, Xianniang angrily demands to be called a warrior, reflecting her inner desire. Mulan and the witch are mutually influential characters. In the film, Xianniang tells Mulan to be herself after their first encounter, which makes Mulan no longer just a soldier but also a Mulan. In the second encounter, Mulan saves the entire army but is dismissed from the army because she confessed her female identity. Xianniang appears again and persuades Mulan to join forces with her to attack the Northern Wei, but Mulan firmly declares that she will not betray her country. It is precisely because Mulan has firmly held her own position, her patriotism moved the witch and also hurt her. Xianniang originally thought that Mulan and she were the same kind, both excluded because of having "qi". However, she discovered that Mulan is more powerful than her and will still fight for her country even if hurt by the country. This resonance eventually made Xianniang sacrifice herself to protect Mulan. Through the character relationship between Mulan and Xianniang, the film presents two different choices: Xianniang chose betrayal and sought personal interests and recognition, while Mulan chose loyalty and dedication, always adhering to her patriotism. This contrast demonstrates the different choices and paths that women can take in the face of difficulties, highlighting the brave and firm qualities of Mulan as the protagonist.

3. Translation Strategies for Movie Subtitles

Movie subtitles play an important role in the film industry. They provide translations of dialogue and conversations, allowing viewers to understand the plot, character development, and emotional expression in the movie. The conveyance of information through movie subtitles serves three important purposes. Firstly, it enables movies to reach a wider audience by crossing linguistic and cultural barriers, thereby promoting the exchange and sharing of global cinema [4]. Secondly, it provides viewers with an understanding of dialogues and conversations within the movie. For those who do not understand the original language, subtitles offer a translation and explanation of the movie's content, allowing them to grasp the storyline, character development, and emotional expression [5]. Thirdly, movie subtitles serve as a useful learning tool for those studying a language. By watching movies with subtitles, learners can simultaneously listen to and read conversations, thereby improving language listening and reading skills [8].

Additionally, subtitles can help learners learn new vocabulary, grammar structures, and oral expressions [1]. However, translating movie subtitles involves a range of strategies to ensure effective communication and conveyance of the original meaning. Translators may employ techniques such as functional equivalence, which aims to convey the same communicative function as the original dialogue [9]. Cultural adaptation is another strategy used to address cultural differences and make the movie more relatable to the target audience. Translators also consider suprasegmental phonemes, such as intonation and stress, to accurately convey the emotions and nuances of the dialogue [10]. Furthermore, the "5W" communication theory provides a framework for translators to consider the who, what, when, where, and why aspects of the dialogue when translating subtitles [4].

By employing these translation strategies, movie subtitles can effectively bridge language and cultural gaps, enabling viewers to fully engage with the film and understand its nuances. The diverse approaches and techniques used in translating movie subtitles contribute to the accessibility and enjoyment of global cinema for a wide range of audiences.

3.1. Literal Translation

Example 1:
Source Text: A young shoot, all green...unaware of the blade.
Translation: 像一棵树苗青葱稚嫩，还不知刀斧的锋利。

It is appropriate to use the metaphor of "一棵树苗青葱稚嫩" to describe the youthful and inexperienced state of the theme. The phrase "还不知" expresses the theme's ignorance and lack of awareness of danger, while "the sharpness of the blade" depicts a vivid image of a blade. This literal translation accurately conveys the meaning of the source text. It preserves the imagery and emotion of the source text without excessive explanation or additional content.

Example 2:

Source Text: "Loyal, brave, and true."

Translation: 尽忠、持勇、存真。

This practice of adding verbs in Chinese translation can make the translation more dynamic and expressive. It transforms adjectives into verbs, emphasizing the action and practicality of these qualities, making the translation more characteristic of the Chinese language expression. Additionally, this method of expression also helps to maintain the rhythm and balance of the source text.

Example 3:

Source Text: Tranquil as a forest...but on fire within.

Translation: 神貌空静如寒林.....内里炽热似烈火。

Using the term "神貌空静" to describe the external appearance of the theme, while metaphorically describing it as "如寒林," connects the inner calmness to the serenity of the forest, evoking visual imagery. The expression "内里炽热" is used to depict the inner state of the theme, and through the metaphor of "似烈火," emphasizes the burning and passion within. This translation method maintains the literal meaning while utilizing metaphors and imagery to add literary and aesthetic qualities to the Chinese translation. It cleverly employs images like the cold forest and blazing fire to convey the feelings and essence of the source material, eliciting a visual and emotional resonance to the audience.

Example 4:

Source Text: Four ounces can move 1,000 pounds.

Translation: 四两，可以拨千斤。

"四两" literally translates to "Four ounces" from the source text, converting the unit from the English system to the Chinese measuring system. Its translation result is presented in the form of a proverb, conveying wisdom and philosophy in a few short words, expressing a universal truth: that even small amounts of power can have a significant impact.

3.2. Free Translation

Example 5:

Source Text: -Do you know why the phoenix sits at the entrance of our shrine?

1-She is the emissary for our ancestors

Translation: -你知道为什么祠堂门口有一尊凤凰吗？

-凤凰是我们花家的瑞兽。

"瑞兽" is a concept in Chinese culture that represents auspiciousness and good luck. By using "瑞兽" to represent "emissary," the translation emphasizes the special status and symbolic meaning of the phoenix, making the translation more closely aligned with Chinese culture. Translating "emissary" as "瑞兽" could be considered a kind of free translation technique in order to better convey the phoenix's special identity and important role in the source text. This translation choice to a certain extent increases the cultural extension and connotation.

Example 6:

Source Text: -You should really consider skipping guard duty and taking a shower.

-You stink, my friend.

Translation: -你来军营后洗过澡吗?

-你身上这味儿，上头。

"上头" is a popular internet slang used to describe a feeling or state of being heightened, prominent, or elevated. In this translation, it is used to emphasize the strong and prominent odor on Mulan in the

current scene, making the translation more expressive and humorous. The use of slang adds to the translation's entertainment value and colloquialism.

3.3. Social Culture

Example 7:

Source Text: -You have proved useful, witch.

-Not witch.Warrior.

Translation: -你这巫女还算有些用处。

-不是巫女，是勇士。

Böri Khan referred to Xianniang as a "witch" and viewed her as a woman with supernatural or unusual abilities. This term confines Xianniang to a negative role, implying that her value is mainly due to her so-called witchcraft ability rather than other aspects. Xianniang responded by saying she is not a witch, but a warrior. This response shows that Xianniang wishes to be recognized as a warrior, rather than being defined solely as a witch. She yearns to be seen as someone with actual combat skills and courage, rather than being limited to the stereotypical female role.

Example 8:

Source Text: -When I found you on a desert steppe wandering alone...you were exiled.

-A scorned dog.

-When I sit on the throne, that dog will have a home.

Translation: -当年我在大漠之中发现你孤身一人.....流离失所。

-像一条丧家之犬。

-等我坐上皇位 丧家犬就有落脚的地方了。

Böri Khan compared the embroidered maiden to a "scorned dog", which is an extremely degrading and insulting metaphor. This metaphor implies that the embroidered maiden is an existence that has been abandoned and despised in his eyes, completely depriving her of her personality and value. Böri Khan stated that only after he ascended to the throne could the embroidered maiden have a home. This statement implies Böri Khan's power and control over the embroidered maiden's fate, further reinforcing his control and insult towards her.

Example 9:

Source Text: -When a wife serves her husband.....she must be silent.

-She must be...invisible.

Translation: -作为妻子，侍奉丈夫时，切记多听少说。

-必须要.....静若无形。

The matchmaker described the role of wives in marriage, emphasizing that they should obey their husbands, keep silent, and disappear into their husbands' shadows. This perspective deprives women of their autonomy and equal status, treating them as attachments to their husbands rather than independent individuals.

Example 10:

Source Text: -Courageous, funny, smart.

-Hua Jun's not describing a woman.

Translation: -胆子大，风趣，还聪明。

-花军说的不像是女人...

Comrades believe that Mulan's ideal type does not conform to the characteristics of women. This implies that at that time, men generally had a fixed and stereotyped perception of women, defining them as beings without the qualities of bravery, humor, and intelligence, neglecting their diversity and individual differences.

Example 11:

Source Text: -You would believe Hua Jun.

-Why do you not believe Hua Mulan?

Translation: -您愿意相信花军。

-为何不肯相信花木兰？

The male protagonist's questioning of Commander Tung implies his doubts about Mulan's honesty and credibility, possibly based on a general prejudice and skepticism towards women. Furthermore, Commander Tung is willing to believe in Hua Jun (Mulan's male alter ego), but is skeptical of Mulan herself. This reflects the widespread tendency of men during this era to trust fellow men more easily and hold doubts towards women's words and abilities.

Example 12:

Source Text: -Xianniang: The attack has met a fierce resistance.

-BORI KHAN: From who?

-Xianniang: A young woman...from a small village.

-BORI KHAN: A girl?

-Xianniang: A woman.

A warrior.

A woman leads the army.

And she's no scorned dog.

Translation: -仙娘：我们的攻击遭到奋力的抵抗。

-步利可汗：什么人抵抗 ？

-仙娘：一个年轻女子，小村寨里出来的。

-步利可汗：小丫头吗？

-仙娘：是个女人。

一位勇士。

一个领兵打仗的女子。

她可不是丧家之犬。

As the leader of the hostile forces, Böri Khan regards the identity of the resistors with contempt and suspicion. He questions the strength and leadership abilities of a young woman from a small village, which reflects his gender bias and doubt towards their abilities in battle. The interaction between these characters reveals concepts of gender inequality and doubts about women's abilities. Böri Khan holds a disdainful attitude towards women resistors, while Mulan and the Xianniang represent those who break gender stereotypes and prove that women have courage and leadership abilities.

4. Drawing on Translation Strategies

The overall subtitle translation for the movie Mulan can still be a reference, particularly in the final part of the film where Mulan's character is well summarized as "loyal, brave, true, devotion to family". From a literal perspective, the translation of "devotion to family" may not necessarily be equivalent to "孝", but the movie wishes to convey that dedication to family is a necessary virtue. In the dictionary, "孝" is translated as 'filial piety', which means showing devotion and respect towards one's parents. In the movie, the choice of 'devotion to family' instead of 'filial piety' is due to the fact that Western families promote independence, emphasize individuality and freedom, while Chinese families prioritize respect for the elderly and demand filial devotion and obedience from their children. To avoid cultural conflicts and potential backlash from Western audiences, the subtitle for "孝" is carefully translated as 'devotion to family', which conveys the meaning of dedication to one's family. This deliberate approach not only downplays cultural differences, but also highlights a common bond - the sense of honor within a family. As a result, it strongly resonates with international viewers.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has investigated the translation strategies utilized in the English subtitles of "Mulan" and their impact on conveying the theme of gender inequality and female

empowerment. Through textual analysis, a range of translation techniques has been explored, including literal translation, free translation, and cultural adaptation. By examining specific examples, it becomes evident that translation choices play a crucial role in shaping the audience's interpretation and understanding of the film's themes.

The findings of this study emphasize the importance of considering cultural context, linguistic nuances, and the target audience in film subtitle translation. The selection of appropriate translation strategies, such as functional equivalence and cultural adaptation, enables translators to effectively convey the intended meaning and societal messages embedded in the film. Looking ahead, further research can delve into the reception and impact of translated subtitles on the target audience. Additionally, comparative studies can be conducted to analyze the differences and similarities in subtitle translation approaches across various films addressing social issues. These research endeavors will contribute to advancing the field of film translation and promoting cross-cultural understanding through cinema.

Overall, this study provides valuable insights into the translation of "Mulan" subtitles and lays the groundwork for future research in the field of film translation and cultural communication.

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