Eco-translatology in Practice: A Case Study of Chinese Subtitle Translation in Transformers

Wenhao Chang *

School of English and International Studies, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing, 100089, China

* Corresponding Author Email: 202420101133@bfsu.edu.cn

Abstract. A large number of foreign films and television works have been introduced thanks to science and technology's advancement and frequent cultural exchanges between countries. However, the domestic research on film and television translation is not satisfactory. Translators must take into account the cultural background and related knowledge of the source language when translating film subtitles. At the same time, the acceptance of the target language by readers should be taken into consideration. In this situation, the eco-translatology theory has sufficient explanatory power for film subtitle translation. As one of the representative works of science fiction films, the film *Transformers* has certain characteristics in text translation. Through the comparative study and analysis of two representative translation versions of *Transformers*, this paper studies the subtitle translation of *Transformers* from the perspective of ecological translation. As a globally influential sci-fi franchise, Transformers' subtitle translation not only reflects the adaptation to different cultural contexts but also reveals the strategies for preserving the original's stylistic traits (e.g., humorous tone, tense plot rhythm) in the target language. This study promotes the further research of domestic film subtitle translation.

Keywords: Eco-translatology, subtitle, translation.

1. Introduction

Beginning in China in 1949, film translation, which can also be referred to as screen translation, audio-visual translation, or multimedia translation, played a significant role in various historical periods. As globalization accelerates, more and more foreign films and TV series are entering the Chinese market. Cross-cultural communication is greatly influenced by subtitle translation. Subtitle translation not only needs to accurately convey the original information but also needs to take into account cultural background, audience acceptance, and readability of the translation. In recent years, domestic research on subtitle translation has gradually increased, mainly focusing on the theories of relevance, purpose, and functional equivalence.

Bilibili is a leading Chinese video-sharing website and a vibrant community for the young generation. It was founded in 2009, and it originally focused on anime and niche subcultures, and since evolved into a comprehensive platform covering a wide range of content. Bibibili's movie section is a popular place for Chinese movie lovers. It includes a very wide range of licensed movies.

The first installment of the "*Transformers*" film was produced by DreamWorks and Paramount Pictures. The movie tells the story of the conflict between the Autobots and Decepticons on Earth. The Decepticons' leader, Megatron, comes to Earth in search of the Cube, aiming to rule the universe; the Autobots's leader, Optimus Prime, leads his comrades to protect the planet. A human teenager, Sam, gets unexpectedly involved and forms a deep friendship with Bumblebee. Eventually, with the joint efforts of humans and Autobots, Megatron is defeated, the Cube is destroyed, and Earth temporarily returns to peace. As a major science fiction film, it achieved great success in the domestic Chinese film market.

This film holds pioneering significance in the history of science fiction movies, featuring many new terms and a large number of words specific to Western culture. This poses certain demands on the translator. However, Chinese scholars rarely analyze this film from the perspective of three-dimensional transformation and lack overall research and criticism of English and Chinese subtitle translation. Therefore, the author chooses this film as an entry point to conduct research from the

perspective of ecological translation studies. Based on this, there are two research questions in this paper: What are the differences and causes of different translation versions of *Transformers*? What is the impact of the translation ecological environment on subtitle translation?

2. Eco-translatology

Ecological Translation Studies, an original translation theory proposed by Professor Hu Gengshen from Tsinghua University, regards translation as an activity that adapts to the translation ecological environment. The theoretical research of ecological translation studies involves translation adaptation and selection theory, translator center theory, relevant order chain theory, harmonious balance theory, and four life views, which are the rules and concepts for ecological translation to explain translation phenomena [1]. Ecological translatology has ushered in a new opportunity in the 21st century. It has been developing and improving under the background of ecological civilization construction and has put forward a new ecological translation view [2]. Eco-translatology is an emerging ecological paradigm in the field of translation studies that is based on ecological holism, Oriental ecological wisdom, and translation adaptation and selection theory [3]. The goal is to study all translation studies and explore the ecological paradigm in a scientific manner. The theory emphasizes "adaptation" and "selection" in the translation process and holds that the translation ecological environment encompasses multiple factors such as the original text, source language, target language, communication, culture, society, author, reader, and client, which could be seen in Figure 1. Eco-translatology includes the adaptation and selection of the translator. In the view of eco-translatology, it is the instinct of translators to adapt to the environment and select proper words and phrases in the process of translation [4]. The "three-dimensional transformation" theory of Ecological Translation Studies, namely the "linguistic dimension", "cultural dimension," and "communicative dimension," provides systematic theoretical guidance for translation practice. In recent years, Ecological Translation Studies has been widely applied in various fields.

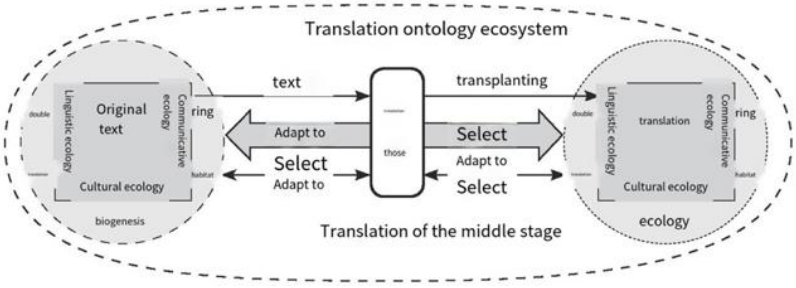


Fig 1. Theoretical system model of eco-translatology [5].

2.1. Language dimension

The translator's adaptive choices when converting linguistic forms during translation are known as adaptive conversion in the language dimension. Naturalness and accuracy are achieved by adjusting the linguistic form between the source and target languages, including vocabulary, syntax, and discourse structure.

2.2. Cultural dimension

The translator's goal in adaptive conversion in the cultural dimension is to match the target language's cultural communication norms while maintaining the cultural connotations of the source language. In order to avoid misunderstandings, translators must be aware of cultural differences

2.3. Communicative dimension

The adaptive conversion in the communicative dimension focuses on the translator's adaptive choices in conveying the communicative intentions of the source text. It emphasizes that translation

should not only focus on language and culture but also ensure that the original communicative intentions are accurately conveyed to avoid misunderstandings.

3. Analysis

Translation strategies mainly have four kinds. The first is a literal translation, which refers to the literal translation of the film content into the translated language [6]. Then there is free translation; at this time, a part of the original content is abandoned, and the truth of the meaning is pursued to achieve the purpose of communication [7]. There are also domestication and foreignization. Domestication refers to the translation of the translator with the culture of the target language masses during the subtitle translations [8]. The last foreignization refers to the choice of retaining the source language and culture after understanding the cultural differences [6].

The film domestication translation strategy is to translate the target language by means of the language, habits, and cultural images of the audience in the target language country so as to make the target language translation natural, fluent, authentic, and easy to accept and eliminate the strangeness of the original text, which is a common technique used in Hollywood commercial blockbusters [9].

Table 1. Adaptation in language dimension.

Title	The translation
The subtitle	Before time began, there was the cube. We know not where it comes from, only that it holds the power to create worlds and fill them with life.
The original translation of the subtitle	在很久的过去，能量体就已经存在了。我们不知道它从哪里来，只知道它拥有创造世界和生命的力量。
The translation of the subtitle in Bilibili	万物初始之前，魔方便已存在。无人知其从何而来,只知其中蕴藏的能量可创造世界、赋予生命。

As Table 1 shows, there is a significant difference in the tone of the two kinds of translations. The original used more colloquial language here. However, the Bilibili version used idioms in Chinese, and it looks more formal than the original one. The Bilibili version shows a change in the language dimension. In the movie, this sentence was presented with the voice of Optimus Prime, the leader of the Autobots. By using more formal language, it successfully formed a figure that is rich in knowledge and a powerful leader.

Table 2. Adaptation in the communicative dimension.

Title	The translation
The subtitle	The ice is freezing faster than it’s melting. Chop faster!
The original translation of the subtitle	冰结的比他化的还要快！大家再加把劲!
The translation of the subtitle in Bilibili	不凿快点的话，就又冰冻上了。麻利点!

Both of the two versions show the transition of the communicative dimension in Table 2. The translations do not show the meaning of chop faster, but all translate it into a more colloquial calling. In the translation, it used a more colloquial language, which fits more with Chinese habits of using language, and it fits the tone of the captain.

Table 3. Adaptation in culture dimension.

Title	The translation
The subtitle	Bobby Bolivia, like the country, except without the runs
The original translation of the subtitle	鲍比·玻利维亚，就像那个国家，除了不是逃来的。
The translation of the subtitle in Bilibili	我是博比·玻利维亚，和那个国家同名，不过不会让你闹肚子。

This conversation happened when Sam was going to buy the car and the seller was introducing himself. The two versions of the translation in Table 3 all show a transition in the culture dimension. In the Bilibili version, it translates ‘without the runs’ into ‘it won’t let you suffer from diarrhea’ in Chinese; this version connects the country Bolivia with the diarrhea, showing that Bolivia has poor sanitation. But it was not translated nicely because the movie watchers in China commonly do not know too much about the sanitation conditions in Bolivia. In comparison, the original translation connected the ‘Bolivia’ with the refugee, saying that the speaker was not a refugee. Here the translation connected the ‘Bolivia’ with the ' refugee’, fitting the common understanding of the Chinese people that America has many immigrants and refugees from other countries. In the face of Chinese and western cultural differences, translators should constantly accumulate Chinese and western cultural background knowledge and improve their sensitivity to cultural differences through a large number of cultural learning and practice [10].

Table 4. Another adaptation in cultural dimension.

Title	The translation
The subtitle	Your first enchilada of freedom awaits underneath those hoods.
The original translation of the subtitle	你的第一道大餐，就在那里面。
The translation of the subtitle in Bilibili	你朝自由迈出的人生第一步，就靠这引擎盖下的东西了。

This conversation in Table 4 took place when Bobby was trying to sell the car to Sam. Enchilada is a traditional Mexican food, usually made from tortilla cakes wrapped in various fillings and then rolled and baked or roasted. The Bilibili version translates as "a personal first step toward freedom," while the original version translates as "the first meal" in order to reduce the reader's understanding cost. But according to the survey, enchiladas are usually eaten as a main meal or part of a meal, with rice, salad, or tortilla chips. It is also popular as a treat for parties or gatherings. The direct translation into "feast" is in order to conform to the context of the owner of the second-hand car dealership for promoting the car to the protagonist at that time. In considering that the film watchers in China commonly do not have too much knowledge about enchilada, the two translations show an adaptation in cultural dimension.

4. Deficiencies and suggestions for improvement

In the first example, the tone of Optimus Prime was not completely shown in the original version of the translation. This loss in presenting the tone would influence the formation of the figure. Besides, in the third example, the translation of Bilibili was not fitted to the common understanding of the Chinese people, and it might cause some bewilderment. In comparison, the original version uses the meaning of ‘It won’t let you suffer from diarrhea’ to show a sense of humor in a way easy to understand.

Though the two versions of translations all show a special feature, there is still a space for them to improve. When translating the subtitle, it should not only focus on presenting the original meaning but also in a way that the film watchers could understand it easily. No matter what kind of translation strategies the translator chooses to use, they should always put the film watching in the first place and make an adaptation of different cultures.

5. Conclusion

From the analysis above, it is found out that the two versions of the film translation all show a certain degree of the adaptive conversion. By using the adaptive conversion in the three dimensions of eco-translatology, the translations significantly reduce the cost for film watchers to understand the content of the film. However, when using the strategies of eco-translatology, they still have some

drawbacks. In the first example, comparing to the Bilibili version, the speaking tone of the Optimus Prime was not shown in the original version of the translation. In the fourth example, the translation in Bilibili did not clearly present the cultural background of Bolivia. and the different style of the two translations is caused by the translation environment. If a better version of the translation of this movie is needed, the translator could find the good parts and combine the two versions of the translation.

Comparing the two different translations, each translation has its own characteristics. The translation of the original subtitles of the movie is relatively simple. When people watch unfamiliar content for the first time in the cinema, they are more inclined to see simple and easy-to-understand content. In contrast, watching movies on video websites can be repeatedly replayed, and the requirement for viewers to quickly understand the subtitles decreases. In addition, the higher pursuit of Bilibili users for movies and subtitles of it makes the translator choose a more formal language. The different translation characteristics of the two versions are adaptations to the translation environment under different circumstances.

In the film translations, the translator should not only pay attention to presenting the original meaning but also in a way the film watchers could easily understand, and at the same time, the culture in it would be presented clearly, and more and more good film translation work would come out in this way.

References

[1] D. J. Luo, the research genealogy and thinking form of ecological translation studies. Journal of Beijing International Studies University, 2012. 1-15 [2025-03-09].

[2] Q. R. Wang, On the Significance of Chinese Eco-translatology to Translation Studies. TRW, USA, **7**(3), 312-315 (2023).

[3] G. S. Hu, Ecological translation studies paradigm: positioning, connotation, and characteristics. FLT (6): 1-6. (2021)

[4] Y. Yu, Study on the Translation of Tourist Public Signs from the Perspective of Ecological Translation. TPLS, **9** (3): 332-340 (2019)

[5] G. S. Hu, X. X. Li, Modeling and Concrete Presentation of the Theoretical System of Ecolinguistic Translation Studies. CTJ. 45 04: 5-14 + 191. (2024)

[6] W. Li, The Application of Subtitle Translation Characteristic Culture in Journey to the West from the Skopos Theory. LNEPPM, 43: 228-232. (2024).

[7] J. Han, Y. F. Ma, Research on film subtitle translation from the perspective of Skopos Theory: A Case Study of Detective Chinatown. Eastern Entertainment Weekly, (8):0144-0146. (2023)

[8] . Ma, A Brief analysis on subtitle translation of domestic films—taking Dying to Survive as an Example. Overseas English, (20):58-59. (2021)

[9] X. J. Zhou, Translation of Film Entertainment Language from the Perspective of Domestication and Alienation Theory—A Case Study of *Transformers*: Age of Extinction. FRI, (11): 35-38. (2015)

[10] Y. Xu, Analysis of cultural differences in English-Chinese translation. Jiaying Literature (19), 105-10 (2024)