

Subtitle Translation of Coco from the Perspective of Communicative Translation Theory

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Abstract: In the context of globalization, the film industries of various countries have rapidly developed. China, while actively exporting its own films, has also imported a large number of excellent foreign films. As a result, film subtitle translation has become an important means of communication between different cultures. Considering the unique nature of film subtitles, it is crucial to ensure that the translation is clear, natural, and faithful to the original, so as to allow the target language audience to experience the same viewing effect as the source language audience. This aligns with communicative translation theory proposed by Peter Newmark. Therefore, this paper primarily adopts Newmark's perspective of communicative translation theory to analyze the English-Chinese subtitles of the film *Coco*. The aim is to summarize the methods, strategies, and techniques of subtitle translation, providing assistance and reference for future subtitle translation work. Conclusion has been drawn that the theory of communicative translation can guide subtitle translation to some extent.

Keywords: Communicative translation; Subtitle translation; *Coco*

Introduction

The process of globalization has promoted the vigorous development of the film and television industry, leading to the emergence of excellent films and television works from various countries. As cultural carriers, films and television works bear the important responsibility of cultural exchange and dissemination. Therefore, subtitle translation plays a crucial role in this process. In 2017, the film *Coco* was released in China. It tells the story of Miguel, the protagonist, who embarks on a fantasy adventure to pursue his music dream after accidentally entering the land of the dead. Based on Newmark's communicative translation theory, this paper focuses on the English-Chinese subtitle translation of *Coco* as the research object. It aims to summarize the methods, strategies and techniques employed in subtitle translation, with the ultimate goal of promoting cultural exchange between China and foreign countries.

1. Newmark and Communicative Translation Theory

Peter Newmark, born in 1916, is a world-renowned translator whose translation theories and ideas have had a profound impact on the translation field, providing important guidance for translation practice. In 1981, Peter Newmark published his first work, *Approaches to Translation*, where he introduced two translation modes: semantic translation and communicative translation^[1]. Unlike semantic translation, communicative translation focuses on the target language readers and emphasizes the effect of the translation. The core of communicative translation lies in conveying information according to the pragmatics of the target language, rather than simply replicating the wording of the source text^[2]. Under the guidance of communicative translation theory, translations often exhibit characteristics of being easily comprehensible, standardized, and natural^[3].

2. An Overview of the Plot and Subtitle Translation of *Coco*

Coco, an animated film, beautifully showcases the vibrant colors of Mexican culture, with its most prominent feature being the incorporation of traditional elements from the Mexican Day of the Dead festival. The film revolves around the protagonist, Miguel, who passionately pursues his dreams of music and aspires to participate in the Day of the Dead music competition. However, his family opposes his musical aspirations. In a fit of anger, Miguel's grandmother destroys his guitar, leading him to run away from home. In order to participate in the competition, Miguel ventures into the tomb of the renowned musician, Ernesto de la Cruz, to steal a guitar. Unexpectedly, he mistakenly enters the land of the dead, embarking on a magical journey^[4]. The intricate storyline eventually leads to a heartwarming and joyful conclusion. Miguel's unwavering determination not only earns the support and blessings of his family but also resolves misunderstandings among his loved ones. As a result, the family is reunited in harmony. The villainous Ernesto de la Cruz faces his rightful consequences, while Miguel's

great-grandfather, Héctor, who was unjustly killed, gains recognition from everyone. In the end, Héctor crosses the Bridge of Marigolds and reunites with his beloved daughter. The film's narrative covers themes of dreams, life, death, and family bonds, providing viewers with a profound experience to savor.

As an animated film that incorporates Mexican culture, *Coco* carries significant cultural connotations within its subtitles. Translators strive to use commonly understood words and expressions, given the quick and concise nature of film subtitles. They use short and flexible sentences to effectively convey information to the target language audience within the constraints of time and space^[5]. By doing so, cultural differences between languages can be narrowed to some extent, enabling target language viewers to overcome barriers between English and Chinese and acquire a deeper understanding of the film's intended message. In this regard, Peter Newmark's theory of communicative translation can serve as a guiding principle for the subtitle translation of *Coco*. Therefore, this study focuses on the English and Chinese subtitles of *Coco* as the research object, analyzing the subtitle translation methods, strategies, and techniques in accordance with Peter Newmark's theory of communicative translation.

3. Case analysis of English-Chinese subtitles of *Coco* under the guidance of communicative translation

Communicative translation aims to minimize the linguistic and cultural differences between the source language and the target language. When translating, translators employ various methods, strategies and techniques to ensure effective communication, optimize the transmission of information, and convey the intended message accurately to the target language readers.^[6]

3.1 Free Translation

Free translation refers to translating the original text while not being constrained by its structure, yet still maintaining the core content. The purpose is to ensure conformity with the standards of the target language. Due to the differences in meaning, structure, and culture between English and Chinese, free translation is commonly employed by translators as the primary method. By using free translation, the information from the source language can be conveyed in a way that facilitates easier understanding for the target language readers, ultimately achieving the desired translation effect.

Example 1

ST1: I would move Heaven and Earth for you.

TT1: 我愿为你赴汤蹈火。

In example 1, “赴汤蹈火” (literally meaning “wade through boiling water and tread on fire”) is a metaphor for courageously moving forward despite difficulties and dangers. Chinese language often employs four-character idioms and colloquial sayings, thus communicative translation should adhere to the pragmatic mode of the target language. If the phrase “move Heaven and Earth” in the original sentence is strictly translated according to its literal meaning, it would be difficult to understand and could pose obstacles for the target language audience. Therefore, the translator chose to translate it as “赴汤蹈火” to capture the essence of the original message. Additionally, the form of using four-character idioms aligns better with the language expression habits of Chinese speakers, making it easier for the target language audience to comprehend the plot.

3.2 Amplification

Amplification is one of the common translation techniques used in English-Chinese translation. It involves adding words, phrases, or sentences based on the thinking, language habits, and expressions of both English and Chinese. This technique is employed while fully understanding and remaining faithful to the original text. Its purpose is to convey the meaning of the original more accurately and, to some extent, provide additional background knowledge to facilitate the understanding of the target readers.

Example 2

ST2: I thought it might have been one of those made-up things that adults tell kids, like...vitamins.

TT2: 我以为这又是一个大人骗小孩的故事呢，就像大人们说的，多吃菜长得快。

The original text depicts a scene where Miguel is astonished by the fantastical land of the dead. Miguel's realization of the existence of the world of the dead, as explained by the adults, is not a falsehood. Following the principle of communicative translation, the translator should fully supplement the meaning conveyed by "vitamins" to make the sentence structure more precise, enhance the clarity of the story's logic, ensure comprehensive information transmission, and assist the target audience in understanding the plot.

Example 3

ST3: We are not visiting your ex-wife.

TT3: 我们今晚才不会去你以前的老婆家过节。

The original text portrays a conversation between a couple in the land of the dead. Based on the story mentioned above, on the night of the Day of the Dead, the deceased return to their living families by crossing the Marigold Bridge. Following the principles of communicative translation, the translator supplements the original content to convey that the deceased couple is not visiting the ex-wife, but rather returning to the living world to celebrate the Day of the Dead. The use of amplification in subtitle translation ensures a more comprehensive and accurate rendition of the content, helping the target audience overcome the challenges posed by cultural differences between Chinese and Western languages while watching the movie.

3.3 Replacement

Replacement refers to the technique of using synonyms or alternative words to fulfill the requirements of language expression. When employing the replacement method, the translator should have a precise and comprehensive understanding of the lexical meaning. Undoubtedly, replacement is one of the significant approaches in subtitle translation. By appropriately utilizing replacement and carefully selecting the wording to be replaced, obstacles in translation can be eliminated.

Example 4

ST4: Miguel, eat your food. Aw, you're a twig, mijo. Have some more.

TT4: 米格，好好吃饭。瞧，你瘦的跟猴似的，多吃点。

The scene depicts the Miguel family dinner, where Miguel proudly displays his dimples to his grandmother at the table. Upon seeing this, his grandmother remarks on his need to eat well. Due to the disparity between English and Chinese metaphors, when describing someone who is relatively thin, English commonly uses the phrase "you're a twig", whereas Chinese employs the expression "你瘦的跟猴似的"(meaning "you are as thin as a monkey"). A literal translation such as "you are thin like a twig" in Chinese would not align with the expression habits of the target language readers. However, translating it as "you are thin like a monkey" not only conveys Miguel's skinniness but also underscores his clever and mischievous character, resembling that of a monkey. Hence, translators should take cultural differences into account and make appropriate substitutions.

Example 5

ST5: You took everything away from me! You rat!

TT5: 你夺走了我的一切，你这个小人！

Ernesto de la Cruz said to Héctor

The original text presents Héctor's accusation against Ernesto de la Cruz. In this context, the translator opts not to directly translate "rat" but instead substitutes it with "小人"(meaning "villain"), which vividly depicts Ernesto de la Cruz's character as someone who will stop at nothing to achieve his goals. Additionally, the word "villain" effectively conveys Héctor's intense hatred towards Ernesto de la Cruz. It can be observed that the judicious use of the replacement method not only helps to overcome cultural obstacles faced by the target audience while watching the movie but also enables a more compelling portrayal of the characters within the film.

3.4 Division

Division refers to a segmentation technique that aligns with Chinese expression and thinking patterns. Given the richness of vocabulary and limited adaptability of Chinese collocations and modifiers, it is important to select appropriate collocations and logical structures, express

them hierarchically, and divide them structurally during the translation process. Implementing division in translation helps avoid verbose and convoluted sentences, and to some extent, prevents the occurrence of translationese.

Example 6

ST6: Here in this plaza, the young Ernesto de la Cruz took his first steps toward becoming the most beloved singer in Mexican history.

TT6: 正是在这座广场上, 年轻的欧内斯托·德拉库斯迈出了他音乐事业的第一步, 最终成为了墨西哥历史上最受欢迎的歌手。

The source text serves as a narrator's introduction to the characters of Ernesto de la Cruz. English and Chinese exhibit significant differences, with English emphasizing structure and Chinese emphasizing meaning. During the translation process, the translator adheres to the pragmatic mode of the target language, rather than adhering strictly to the form of the original text. The translator follows the principle of communicative translation, which places emphasis on the target language. By adopting the division method, the translator translates a lengthy sentence in the source text into two shorter sentences. This approach helps avoid excessively long sentences that may pose difficulties for the audience to comprehend. It aligns with the writing standards of Chinese and reflects the characteristics of concise, clear, and easily understandable subtitle translation.

3.5 Conversion

Conversion involves transforming parts of speech, sentence patterns, and voice in the original sentence to align with the language habits of the target language. This includes converting parts of speech, word order, and voice. In communicative translation, the translator is tasked with conveying information in accordance with the language, culture, and pragmatic mode of the target language. The translation should conform as closely as possible to the language habits of the target language in order to achieve an optimal viewing experience. Word order conversion and part-of-speech conversion are common techniques employed in film subtitle translation.

Example 7

ST7: Cause of something that happened before I was born.

TT7: 因为我出生前发生了一些事。

In example 7, the reason his family didn't like music was that his great-grandfather had abandoned his wife and children to pursue his musical dreams, leaving his great-grandmother to raise their daughter alone. Due to the substantial differences in word order between English and Chinese, translators should adhere to the principle of communicative translation and adjust the original word order to match the target audience's preferences. Therefore, when translating, translators strictly follow the Chinese word order and may rearrange the original order as needed. This approach ensures that the translation is more easily understood by the audience and achieves a favorable viewing effect.

Example 8

ST8: He started out a total nobody from Santa Cecilia, like me.

TT8: 他最开始在圣塞西莉亚一点名气都没有。

The original text provides an introduction to Ernesto de la Cruz's life experiences before he achieved fame. In the original text, the term "nobody" functions as a noun, implying someone of little importance. The translator rendered it as a verb phrase in Chinese, "一点名气都没有", which successfully transformed the noun into a verb and enhanced the ease of understanding in the translation. This conversion aligns with the principle of communicative translation, which prioritizes the target language orientation.

3.6 Negation

Negation refers to the process of expressing statements in English from a positive perspective and translating them into Chinese from a negative perspective, or vice versa, where English statements are expressed negatively and translated into Chinese positively. The ultimate goal of this approach is to better align with the expression habits of the target language.

Example 9

ST9: She died way before I was born.

TT9: 我还没出生时, 她就过世了。

In example 9, the source text is an assertive sentence that Miguel introduces his great-grandmother Imelda to the audience. The literal translation in Chinese would be “我出生前，她就过世了。” However, in the official translation, “before I was born” is rendered as the negative form “我还没出生时”。 This translation choice aligns with the language expression habits of the target language audience and facilitates their understanding of the plot direction.

Example 10

ST10: You go home my way, or no way.

TT10: 想回家就得听我的话。

The original text is a dialogue between Miguel and his great-grandmother Imelda. Miguel has wandered into the land of the dead, and Imelda offers to send him back to the world of the living on the condition that Miguel gives up music. Miguel doesn't want to comply, but Imelda still utters these words. In the original text, “no way” conveys the meaning of “impossible” with a strong negative connotation. When translating, the translator renders it as positive sentences in Chinese, following the principle of communicative translation that prioritizes the target language. This translation expresses Imelda's stance against Miguel's pursuit of his musical dreams and effectively highlights Imelda's uncompromising personality.

4. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the subtitle translation of the film “Coco” under the guidance of communicative translation theory. From the perspective of communicative translation theory, translators have the flexibility to employ various strategies, methods, and techniques to convey the cultural aspects, emotions, and thoughts from the source language to the target audience more effectively. By minimizing cultural differences in subtitle translation, the aim is to provide the target audience with a viewing experience that closely resembles that of the source audience, thereby facilitating cross-cultural communication. In conclusion, communicative translation theory plays a crucial guiding role in the translation of film subtitles.

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