



Subtitle Translation Strategies as a Reflection of Technical Limitations: a Case Study of Ang Lee's Films

Ying Zhang & Junyan Liu

School of Foreign Language

Jiangxi Science & Technology Normal University

E-mail: zy_harvey@hotmail.com

Abstract

Subtitling, unlike traditional forms of translation, is subject to the limitations imposed by different subtitling apparatuses, for example, not more than two lines on one screen. In order not to breach these limitations, subtitlers adopt different strategies in their attempts to convey film plots or content to target language audiences, thereby creating an interface between culture and technology in the context of translation.

This paper mainly looks at the interface which occurs in the process of translating film dialogue from Mandarin Chinese into English. Using as a case study films by Ang Lee, a prominent Chinese film director in global film circles, we shall focus on the investigation of translation strategies adopted in subtitling, and work out the possible interface between culture and technology in operation there. In addition, we may find an answer to the question whether technology is changing the face of translation.

The film *Wo Hu Cang Long* [Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon] is the main case study considered and six of its English subtitle versions from China (including Hong Kong and Taiwan), America and the Great Britain respectively will be compared and discussed.

Keywords: Subtitle, Strategies, Film, Interface, Translation

1. Introduction

With the rapid developments in high technology, both in software and hardware, in recent years, more and more information has been presented in or transferred to audio-visual formats, such as films in DVD formats, and that has increased the interface between technologies, language and culture. Amongst these media, subtitling is a key technique for facilitating communication with viewers and has recently been widely discussed, especially in comparison with dubbing which is, at present, another mainstream method.

Subtitling, according to Dries (1995), can be initially divided into two main categories, "inter-lingual subtitling" and "intra-lingual subtitling"; inter-lingual subtitling encompasses the communication "from one language into another language" and "from spoken dialogue into a written, condensed translation which appears on the screen" (pp.26). This corresponds to what De Linde and Kay (1999) have to say in their book, that "the amount of dialogue has to be reduced to meet the technical conditions of the medium and the reading capacities of non-native language users" in its attempts to "achieve something approaching translation equivalence when conducting subtitling" (pp.1-2). Accordingly, we assume that the information in the source language may be different from that of the target language with inter-lingual subtitling, and this kind of translation process from oral to written language may have more to do with technical factors, as compared with traditional text translation, such as literary translation, and these considerations call for further discussion.

In order to explore the process of inter-lingual subtitling, to work out the possible interface between technologies, language and culture in its operation, and to explore whether technology is changing the face of translation, the film, *Wo Hu Cang Long* [Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon], has been chosen as the case study here and the translation strategies adopted in the subtitling process will form the basis of the main investigation. In addition, six of its English subtitle versions from China (including Hong Kong and Taiwan), America and the Great Britain respectively will be compared and discussed.

2. Technical constraints in inter-lingual subtitling for the cinema

2.1 Different technical constraints

Subtitle translation, unlike literary translation, is a process from verbal language into written text, and highly dependent on subtitling equipment to present or transfer information to its viewers.

Take the appearance of translated subtitles for example. Subtitling companies may choose particular typefaces to present translated texts in conformity with their demand for the greatest clarity (Ivarsson & Carroll, 1998, pp.39, 42-43). In addition to that, they may tackle the issue of layout to position translated texts for optimal legibility, such as “at the bottom of the screen” (Ivarsson & Carroll, 1998, pp.50). The number of lines on one screen is another issue and translated subtitles generally occupy “a maximum of two lines” (Gottlieb, 1998, pp.245), containing no more than “forty English letters and spaces” (Luyken et al., 1991, pp.43) or “thirteen Chinese characters” (Qin, 1997, p.27) per line, on one screen to avoid being crowded out of it. This maximum number of English characters is only for “34mm films” and will vary with different media, film gauges and their target viewers (Luyken et al., 1991, p.43). Finally, they may take account of timing, punctuation and other conventions. All of these are crucial factors in the whole subtitling process and may be written down in manuals or memoranda for future reference. Subtitle translators, therefore, need to bear these regulations or technical limitations in mind when producing subtitles. They usually adopt different strategies to avoid breaching these constraints and to meet the requirements of their clients.

2.2 Corresponding subtitle translation strategies in Europe

Jan Ivarsson

Jan Ivarsson is one of the few media translation scholars to have proposed corresponding subtitle translation strategies in Europe. His book *Subtitling for the Media: A Handbook of an Art* (1992) provides guidance for individuals involved or interested in subtitle translation and its practice. Six years later, he finished another book *Subtitling* (1998) with the scholar Mary Carroll in an attempt to offer up-to-date information about subtitling and its recent innovations to readers. In these books, nice strategies are mentioned and discussed, and most of them are highly relevant to the limitations posed by subtitling software.

Henrik Gottlieb

In addition to Ivarsson, Gottlieb is another eminent scholar in the media translation field. He has published several essays or books in recent years, including *Subtitling* in 2001. In that essay, he summarises ten kinds of subtitling strategy to deal with a range of problems, including language and culture-specific ones. Take “dislocation”, for example, (Gottlieb, 2001, pp.1010). Translators may adopt this method to offer different translations or expressions when tackling “music or visualized language-specific terms” (Gottlieb, 2001, pp. 1010).

In recent years, more and more scholars or researchers have extended their research field to include media translation and introduced us to their findings. However, the strategies they propose are mainly Europe-centered and their applicability to Asian films is open to question.

3. Case Study---Crouching tiger, hidden dragon

3.1 Background information

Li An [Ang Lee], a prominent Chinese film director in the global film industry, has received several international prizes since 1991. One of his films, *Wo Hu Cang Long* [Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon], won four Oscars in 2000, and was a milestone in both his film career and the history of Chinese film. *Wo Hu Cang Long* [Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon] is a martial-arts film and the “interpreter” (here the subtitle translator), Zhang Zheng Zheng is the sole translator according to the credits list.

Before looking at the different strategies, we put six subtitle versions of the film *Wo Hu Cang Long* [Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon] together for an initial comparison and found the English subtitles in the American or the British versions were almost the same as those in the Chinese ones, apart from some misspellings, different “subtitle breaks” (Ivarsson & Carroll, 1998, pp.90-91) or a few differences in punctuation marks at the end of dialogues. The number of these differences is about 150—that is one sixth of the total figure of titles. Therefore, we turned our attention to the Mandarin Chinese dialogues and their English translations in the Chinese DVD and Hong Kong VCD versions for further examination.

3.2 Strategies in the Chinese DVD version

First, expanded expressions for Chinese cuisine: for a culture-specific term such as we find

in Chinese cuisine, it is always hard to find a completely corresponding term in the target language. To solve this kind of problem, film subtitle translators may use another familiar expression to convey a similar meaning. Take excerpt one, for example: “Hua Diao Zheng Gui Yu” is a traditional Chinese dish and its ingredients mainly include Hua Diao Jiu [a

kind of wine, Shao Xing Jiu], and Gui Yu [mandarin fish]. It has been translated as “steamed whole cod” in the film, not “steamed Mandarin fish with Hua Diao Jiu”, to avoid confusing the audience, and to keep the idea of Chinese. The method is similar to the strategy of “expansion” that Gottlieb introduces in his article, *Subtitling* (2001, pp. 1010).

Excerpt 1

Dialogue: Hua Diao Zheng Gui Yu, Gan Zha Tou Hao Li Ji

[Literal translation: steamed Mandarin fish with Hua Diao Jiu, dry deep-fried pork chop]

Subtitle: steamed whole cod/bite-size meatballs...

Secondly, omission or paraphrase of certain texts: as Ivarsson notes (1992), film subtitle translators may “omit something that is not regarded as strictly necessary for an understanding of the dialogue or of paraphrasing” (pp.91). In addition, “sometimes paraphrases are unavoidable when it is impossible to actually skip anything that is said” (pp.92). Translators usually employ a selection of these two methods to make translated subtitles short enough for the space available when encountering long-winded dialogues. Take excerpt two for example. The translator omitted the text “Ta Men Yi Dao Jing Cheng Jiu Ti Wo Ding Cia Zhe Men Qin Shi” and paraphrased the rest as “my parents are arranging everything” to represent the parental domination in children’s marriage in ancient Chinese society. A similar application of this strategy can also be found in the remaining part of excerpt two.

Excerpt 2

Dialogue: Fan Zheng Hun Shi You Wo Die Niang Jue Ding

Ta Men Yi Dao Jing Chen//Jiu Ti Wo Ding Xia Zhe Men Qin Shi

Niang Shuo Lu Tai Lao Ye Shi Chao Nei De Da Guan//You Shi San Dai Han Lin

Ru Guo Neng Gen Lu Jia Lian Yin//Dui Die Zai Bei Jing Da You Hao Chu

[Literal translation: Anyway, my marriage is determined by my parents.

They arranged the marriage once they arrived in the capital.

Mum said, Sir Lu is an eminent official at the Court

and three generations of them are all in the Hanlin Academy.

It would be beneficial to Dad in Beijing, were I to marry a Lu]

Subtitle: My parents//are arranging everyting.

The Gous are a very powerful family.

My marrying one will be good//for my father’s career.

Thirdly, condensation of bundles of texts: some protagonists, as Ivarsson has pointed out, may “say in a few seconds two or three times as many words as there is room for in the two (at best, three) subtitle lines below the picture” (1992, pp.92). In that case, an over-lengthy dialogue may necessitate condensation by the translator in order to get rid of any redundant information. The protagonist in excerpt three, for example, offers information on the lost sword, Qing Ming Jian [Green Destiny], in his reply to the boss, Bei Le Ye [Sir Te], and the first and third lines of the subtitles are not really necessary. Therefore, the translator kept the second subtitle line and left out the rest. This method corresponds to Gottlieb’s idea of “condensation” (2001, pp.1010).

Excerpt 3

Dialogue: Qing Ming Jian Shi Me Zhao Hui Lai

Ke Shi Wo Gan Du//Zei Ren Yu Yu Da Ren Jia You Gua Gou

Cha Ta Ge Di Er Diao

[Literal translation: I didn’t get the Green Destiny Sword back,

But I bet the thief is related to Yu’s family.

Let’s check it out]

Subtitle: I’m sure the thief//is in the Yu household.

Fourthly, the application of ellipsis, which according to Ivarsson (1992) can, “safely leave out the words whose main purpose is to keep the conversation ticking over, tautologies and repetitions.” (pp.93). Take excerpt four for example. The translator abridged the text “Ji Ran Shi Zhe Yang [in this case]” and retained the main meaning of the dialogue in his English translations.

Excerpt 4

Dialogue: Ji Ran Shi Zhe Yang

Ban Wan Le Shi, Ni Dao Bei Jing Gen Wo Hui He//Ni Lai, Wo Jiu Deng Ni

[Literal translation: Join me in Beijing once you're done.

If you're coming, I will wait for you there]

Subtitle: Join me//once you have finished. I can wait for you in Beijing.

Fifthly, simplifying the text: translators, according to Ivarsson (1992), can use "simplified syntactic structure rather than the complex ones when necessary, and the difference in terms of meaning is sometimes negligible" (pp.94). Here the translator dismisses complicated descriptions of the main character in films by choosing a simplified syntax instead. An example can be found in excerpt five.

Excerpt 5

Dialogue: Dang Jin Tian Xia Lun Jian Fa, Lun Wu De//Zhi You Mu Bai Pei Shi Yong Zhe Ba Jian

[Literal translation: Speaking of swordsmanship and morality in martial arts, nowadays Mu Bai is the only person in this world who deserves to use this sword]

Subtitle: He is the only one in the world//worthy of carrying it.

Sixthly, using simpler vocabulary: "it is easier and takes less time to read simple, familiar words than unusual ones" (Ivarsson, 1992, pp.95). Therefore, the translator here uses "wild chicken" to represent the "Gu La Ji" in excerpt six. Gu La Ji is a type of pheasant bred in the current Xinjing Uygur Autonomous Region in Mainland China.

Excerpt 6

Dialogue: Da Lie Hen Guan Yong De

Xiang Pen Pen De Gu La Ji

[Literal translation: Great for hunting. Delicious Go La chicken]

Subtitle: Great for hunting wild chicken. They're delicious.

Seventhly, various approaches to "appellation translation", including "proper nouns, personal names, titles, sobriquets of the characters or places are given" (Mok, 2002, pp.273). According to Mok (2002), translators may use different formulae to translate characters in martial-arts films, such as a "personal name with sobriquet for professional titles" (pp.277). They usually use one adjective and one noun together for sobriquets; that is similar to what we have found in our case study. Take excerpt seven for example. The translator translated the sobriquet of the character here using the formula of one adjective and one noun. However, the translation of personal names may vary. Take excerpts eight and nine, for instance. Only the surname was translated in excerpt eight, and this caused another issue to do with the pronunciation of the Mandarin Chinese characters. The mountain in excerpt ten, for example, is translated as "Wudan" with onomatopoeia, even though that is not exactly how it is pronounced in Chinese. The term is pronounced "Wudang" in Mainland China, "Moudong" in Hong Kong.

Excerpt 7

Dialogue: Bi Yan Hu Li Zai Na Li?

[Literal translation: Where is Jade-eyed Fox?]

Subtitle: Where is Jade Fox?

Excerpt 8

Dialogue: Zai Xia "Ji Dong Tie Ying Zhua" Song Ming

[Literal translation: I am "Iron Eagle Talon in East Hebei" Song Ming]

Subtitle: I'm Iron Eagle Sung...

Excerpt 9

Dialogue: Zhe Wei Shi Wo Shi Ge "Fei Tian Bao" Li Yun

[Literal translation: This is my brother in arms "Flying Leopard" Li Yun]

Subtitle: and this is my brother in arms...

Flying Cougar Li Yun

Excerpt 10

Dialogue: Li Mu Bai Rang Ta Qu Wu Dang Shan Le

[Literal translator: Li Mu Bai let him go to Wudang Mountain]

Subtitle: He sent him//to Wudan Mountain.

3.3 Translations in other English versions

Now, let us turn to the different translations of Mandarin Chinese dialogue and Hong Kong

versions. After comparing the English translations of these two versions, we found more than 100 differences and these could be initially divided into three categories.

The first category is the lack of a complete translation in the Hong Kong English version: take excerpt eleven for example. It is not clear what sort of objectives have been mentioned when reading the Hong Kong English translation only. The audience, therefore, may get confused or possibly misunderstand the whole film plot.

Excerpt 11

Dialogue: San Jiao Jiu Liu, Wang Lai Ren Deng

[Literal translation: people from all walks of life and different ranks.]

Subtitle: Here, you'll find all sorts of characters. (Mandarin version)

Here, you'll find all sorts. (Hong Kong version)

The second category is the different interpretation of the same dialogue: take excerpt twelve for example. The weapon "Shuang Dao" is translated as "machete" in the Chinese English version and as "saber" in the Hong Kong English version. These two translations do not represent the same weapon and the Chinese one, machete, is the better one from the perspective of shape and function. Overall, similar cases in Mandarin Chinese English version are more accurate.

Excerpt 12

Dialogue: Wo Shi Shuang Dao, Jian Fa Wo Lue Tong Yi Er

[Literal translation: I use double blades and more or less understand swordsmanship.]

Subtitle: Yes, I am.

But I prefer the machete. (Mandarin version)

Yes, I am.

But I prefer the saber. (Hong Kong version)

The third category is the difference in the layout of the different versions, which is attributable to the differences between the technical limitations in the VCD and DVD versions. As a consequence, translators may have different choices of layout, and that has resulted in a different order of word groups even though the whole sentence meaning is still the same. An example can be found in excerpt thirteen.

Excerpt 13

Dialogue: Xia Hui Yu Le Ta/Ta Yao Shi Zai Bu Ken Ming Jiang

Gao Su Wo, Wo Qu Gen Ta Shuo

[Literal translation: If he still refuses to make it explicit when you meet him next time.

Let me know and I will have a word with him!]

Subtitle: Tell me if Li Mu Bai is not more//open the next time you see him.

I'll give him an earful! (Mandarin version)

The next time you see him tell me if Li Mu Bai is not more open.

I'll gibe him an earful! (Hong Kong version)

3.4 Culture-bound problems

Finally, we have found some loose interpretation of certain cultural terms. Take excerpt fourteen, for example. The term "You Shi" meant the period of the day from five to seven pm in ancient Chinese society and it is translated as "midnight" in the English translation. Another example is "Zhen Ren" in excerpt fifteen. This is a term used mostly in the Taoist religion and translated as "Taoist priest". The term monk is used mostly in the Buddhist religion.

Excerpt 14

Dialogue: Jin Wan You Shi//Huang Tu Gang Shang, Yi Jue Sheng Si!

[Literal translation: Let's settle it once for all, this evening on the Yellow Hill!]

Subtitle: "We'll settle this at midnight//on Yellow Hill."

Excerpt 15

Dialogue: Dao Yuan Zhen Ren Nian Chu//Cong Wu Dang Shan Lu Guo Zhe Li

[Literal translation: Early this year, Taoist priest Dao Yuan passed here en route from Wu Dang Mountain]

Subtitle: Monk Zheng Said//you were at Wudan Mountain.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Subtitling, a translation process from oral language into written text, is different from literary translation. When it comes to technical limitations, as Luyken and his colleagues have mentioned “its tasks are particularly restrained by time and space which are imposed by the nature of television and film production” (1991, pp.42); we may agree that the translation process from oral into written text does create some difficulties, such as the goal of achieving maximum legibility or being terse to avoid crowding translated subtitles out of the screen. Film subtitle translators need to bear these limitations in mind to avoid breaching them. However, subtitlers also need to take account of other factors in relation to language and culture, in order to present or transfer information to their target audiences. We may, therefore, conclude that technology, when it comes to subtitle translation, does not greatly change the essence of translation, but enriches it. In film subtitle translation, not only linguistic or cultural factors must be taken into consideration, as with literature, but also different technical limitations.

References

- De, Linde, Z., & Kay, N. (1999). *The Semiotics of Subtitling*. Manchester: St. Jerome.
- Dir. Li A. [Ang Lee]. (2000). DVD. *Wo Hu Cang Long* [Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon]. American version. (2001). [Columbia TriStar].
- Dir. Li A. [Ang Lee]. (2000). DVD. *Wo Hu Cang Long* [Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon]. British version. (2004). [Columbia TriStar].
- Dir. Li A. [Ang Lee]. (2000). DVD/VCD. *Wo Hu Cang Long* [Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon]. Mandarin version. (2002). [Columbia TriStar].
- Dir. Li A. [Ang Lee]. (2000). VCD. *Wo Hu Cang Long* [Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon]. .Hong Kong version. (2000). [Columbia TriStar].
- Dries, J. (1995). *Dubbing and Subtitling: Guidelines for Production and Distribution*. Düsseldorf, Ger.:European Institute for the Media.
- Gottlieb, H. (2001). Subtitling. In S.-W. Chan & D.E. Pollard (Eds.), (2001). *An Encyclopedia of Translation: Chinese-English, English-Chinese*. Hong Kong: Chinese Up. pp.104-111.
- Ivarsson, J. (1992). *Subtitling for the Media: A Handbook of an Art*. Stockholm: Transedit.
- Luyken, G.-M., et al. (1991). *Overcoming Language Barriers in Television: Dubbing and Subtitling for the European Audience*. Manchester: European Institute for the Media.
- Mok, O. (2002). Translating Appellations in Martial-Arts Fiction. *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology*, 10, 273-281.
- Qin, P. P. [Candice Chin]. (1997). *Ying-Zhong Zi Mu Fan Yi De Jing Jian Yuan Ze* [Clarity and Concision: As Working Principles of Subtitle Translation]. MA thesis Fu Jen Catholic U.