

# Movie Subtitle Translation from the Perspective of the Three-dimensional Transformations of Eco-translatology: A Case Study of the English Subtitle of *Lost in Russia*

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**Abstract**—Eco-Translatology, a new eco-translation paradigm, is put forward by Chinese Professor Gengshen Hu and has been gaining popularity in recent years. Guided by the eco-translatology theory, the study analyzes the adaptive strategies that translators used in the English subtitle of *Lost in Russia* from the following dimensions: language, culture and communication. And the analysis sheds some light on subtitle translation and helps subtitle translators better apply eco-translatology to produce a well-received English version.

**Index Terms**—eco-translatology, three-dimensional transformations, subtitle translation, *Lost in Russia*

## I. INTRODUCTION

*Lost in Russia*, produced by the renowned Chinese director Zheng Xu, was scheduled to be released in theaters in the New Year in 2020. However, due to the COVID-19, it has been released free online. However, the change has been met with mixed reviews that some people think it as innovation and others lambast it for breaking the rules. Although there are many people who have different opinions on it, the time will tell whether it is innovation or destruction.

*Lost in Russia* mainly tells the story of Ivan Xu, who plans to get his passport to the United States, gets on a train to Russia with his mother Xiaohua Lu accidentally. In the journey, he and his mother's contradictions become more acute because of the passer-by Natasha and Ivan's father. Meanwhile, he has to compete with his wife Lu Zhang for business in the US. In order to reach Moscow in time, he and his mother have to overcome the difficulties and understand each other gradually.

*Lost in Russia*'s language is characterized by generous use of four-character idioms (chengyu) and humor. And the translator has handled it with selective adaptation and adaptive selection, which fully embodies the theory of eco-translatology.

This paper is composed of four parts.

Part 1 provides an introduction to the paper, including the movie *Lost in Russia* and the structure of the paper.

Part 2 is the theoretical framework. In this section, it makes a brief introduction of Prof. Hu's Eco-Translatology, and makes a short statement of three-dimensional transformations as well as the subtitle translation.

Part 3 is the major part of the paper. It conducts a detailed case study of the subtitle translation of *Lost in Russia*. In this section, 16 examples are put under discussion.

Part 4 is the concluding part which summarizes the current situation of Chinese films and gives pointers for the subtitle translation.

## II. THEORETICAL BASIS AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This part expounds on the theory of eco-translatology, and gives a general introduction to the analytical framework of the three-dimensional transformations. In addition, the subtitle translation is also briefly introduced in the end.

### A. Eco-translatology

Eco-translatology, a new paradigm of translation study, is put forward by Chinese Prof. Hu Gengshen who has been inspired by modern ecological wave of "return to nature" and borrowed Darwin's principle of natural selection in translation studies (Tongtong Ma, 2019, p.14). It is the first attempt to make an overall and scientific combination translation and ecology and has been gaining more and more attention from translation theorists.

According to Gengshen Hu (Gengshen Hu, 2013, p.485-499), eco-translatology views translation as a harmonious eco-system and probes into translational eco-environments, textual ecology and translation community as well as their interrelationships and interplay. And he defines translation as a production of target texts by "natural" selection by means of the translator's adaptation to the eco-environment. This explanation can be simplified to a formula: Translation=Adaptation + Selection (Gengshen Hu, 2013, p.86-87).

### B. Analytical Framework of the Three-dimensional Transformations

Eco-translatology upholds that a best translation is one that has the highest degree of holistic adaptation and selection. It is argued that the translator should take into account as many factors in the translational eco-environment as possible. Given that the translational eco-environment includes the worlds of the source text and the source/target languages, the linguistic, communicative, cultural and social aspects of translating as well as the author, the client and the readers, it is unpractical and unfeasible to make selection and adaptation in all these aspects. As a result, transformations in the linguistic, cultural and communicative dimensions are the foci in translating and the principle of the three-dimensional transformations is accepted as the guiding one for translating (Chenyang Yang, 2019, p.16).

Gengshen Hu (Gengshen Hu, 2004) pointed that the idea of “three-dimensional transformations” was actually a kind of translation method that made some adaptive selections in the linguistic, cultural and communicative dimension. And there is an inherent correlation among the three dimensions: translation is the transformation of languages; language is the carrier of culture and culture is the result of communication. And the following will introduce the three transformations.

#### 1. Linguistic transformation

Linguistic transformation concerns the adaptation and selection at various levels, including but not limited to the language style of being formal or informal, simple or complex, the use of rhetoric devices and punctuation (Chenyang Yang, 2019, p.20).

#### 2. Cultural transformation

Since translation is a way of communication that transcends the barrier of language and culture, cultural differences are the root of potential misunderstanding. Hence the translator should keep cultural consciousness in mind and try to break through the barriers arising from the cultural differences.

#### 3. Communicative transformation

In accordance with eco-translatology, the translator should attach attention to communicative transformation apart from transformation in the linguistic and cultural dimensions. Specifically, on the one hand, the translator should ensure that the overall communicative purpose of the source text is fully embodied in the target text and transferred to the target readers; on the other hand, the translator should assure that the form and connotation of the source language and culture should be transferred to the readers (Chenyang Yang, 2019, p.21-22).

By making selective adaptation and adaptive selection in the linguistic, cultural and communicative dimensions, the translator should achieve the harmony and balance of the translational eco-environment, and ensure the survival and long lasting of the transformed ecology.

### C. Subtitle Translation

Apart from pictures and sounds, subtitle translation is one of the tools the audience used to gain information from a foreign film. Therefore, it plays a vital role in the promotion of a film across foreign countries. According to Jorge Diaz and Aline (Chenyang Yang, 2019, p.6), subtitling can be defined as a translation practice that consists of presenting a written text, generally on the lower part of the screen, that endeavors to recount the original dialogue of the speakers, as well as the discursive elements that appear in the image (letters, inserts, graffiti, inscriptions, placards), and the information contained on the soundtrack (songs, voice). Therefore, subtitling can be seen as a process of achieving a harmonious co-existence between the action on the screen, the translated text and the level of readability.

So is the subtitle translation of *Lost in Russia*. The translator should make a compromise between the desire to faithfully translate and the necessity to meet the technical and textual constraints on subtitle translation and manage to achieve harmony of the environment in a bid to produce a well-received translation.

## III. ANALYSIS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE THREE-DIMENSIONAL TRANSFORMATIONS

In this section, it selects 16 examples from the subtitle of *Lost in Russia* and sets out to make a case study of the subtitle translation from the linguistic, cultural and communicative dimensions respectively.

### A. Linguistic Dimension

Adaptation and selection in the linguistic dimension is the most underlying job in translation. It requires that the translator makes adaptive selection and selective adaptation in the linguistic environment of the source text and source language and adopts an equivalent that goes in line with the reading habit of the target readers in such aspects as language forms or rhetoric devices (Chenyang Yang, 2019, p.23).

Based on the characteristics of English and Chinese, it is different in sentence structure that Chinese is parataxis while English is hypotaxis. And Wenguo Pan pointed out that “English takes the verb as the center in theory, while in fact, it is dominated by the noun. As for Chinese, it takes the noun as the focus in theory, while in fact, the verb has a certain advantage in it” (Wenguo Pan, 1997, p.397). Therefore, it can be found that due to the different ways of logic between Chinese and English, there are dynamic and static transformations in the translation.

In short, the selection and adaptation in the linguistic dimension can be mainly conducted at the adaptation of parataxis and hypotaxis and the balance between dynamic and static.

#### 1. The adaptation of parataxis and hypotaxis

Now that the sentence structures are diverse between Chinese and English, selection and adaptation in the part are common in the subtitle of *Lost in Russia*. For example:

(1) ST: 我妈一开门我突然抱住她我妈会以为我爸又活过来了

TT: If I do that, my mom would think my dad's risen from the dead.

This statement is uttered by Ivan Xu to Lu Zang when she advises him to hug and care for his mother but he is not willing to. The TT adds the word "if" to emphasize the subjunctive mood. And it clears up the logic of the ST.

(2) ST: 后来你妈说要坐火车你还不高兴了

TT: You were upset when your mom said to take the train.

The translator removes "后来" instead of the "when". In this way, it restores the linear structure of English makes the TT more authentic and it is a concise way of adaptation and selection.

(3) ST: 找律师拖住他们 我随后就到

TT: Hold them with a lawyer, until I get there.

The translator adds the word "until" to manifest the implicit logical relationship between the two clauses in ST, so as to achieve the adaptive transformation in the linguistic dimension.

## 2. The balance between dynamic and static

The description of the same objective can be static or dynamic. Therefore, the translators should "adapt according to circumstances" and choose the better one to translate. Here are some examples:

(4) ST: 他应该吃几块红烧肉 脸上的肉是横着长还是竖着长 什么时候要孩子 膀胱几点钟排水 你全部都设定好了

TT: How much pork to eat, pig face or horse face to grow, when to have a baby, and when to drain your bladder, are all set by you.

This statement is uttered by Ivan Xu to his mother Xiaohua Lu when he complains about her way of education. The TT adapts the words "pig" and "horse" to visualize the phrase "横着长还是竖着长". The translation shows a perfect transition between static and dynamic without losing its comic humor.

(5) ST: 这咋还飞出来了呢

TT: Now Peter Pan?

This statement is said by the trainman to Ivan Xu when Ivan is ejected from the compartment. The translator's choice of the word "Peter Pan" not only shows the balance between dynamic and static, but also shows the cinephile of the trainman. Because in the previous plot, when Ivan wants to get on the train and clings to the door regardless of the danger, the trainman describes Ivan as the Spider-Man. In addition to these, there are *Inception* and *Titanic* that the translator used to describe Ivan's behavior. The names of these movies are a good reflection of the three dimensions.

(6) ST: 就像我和维克多一样, 曾经那么好, 可是他把我抛弃了, 他把我弃如敝履了

TT: Just like Victor and me. I was his Miss-Dreamy. Then he dumped me. Like I was a Miss-Nightmare.?

The statement is uttered by Natasha to Ivan when they talk about her boyfriend. The TT adapts the words "Miss-Dreamy" and "Miss-Nightmare" to translate the phrases "曾经那么好" and "弃如敝履". The two nouns show the affection and separation between Natasha and her boyfriend vividly. And the nouns show a perfect transition between static and dynamic.

## B. Cultural Dimension

Apart from the language difference between China and western countries, the cultural difference is also an important aspect to discuss. There are many Cultural words in the movie. In order to introduce these words to foreigners, the translator needs not only translational skills, but also a thorough understanding of Chinese culture. Therefore, it is important that the translator's selective adaptation and adaptive selection between the ST and TT.

(7) ST: 这是一句歌词吗

TT: Is that Beyonce's lyric?

This statement is asked by Ivan Xu to Lu Zhang when Lu says "你还记不记得上一次给你妈妈的拥抱时在什么时候(When was the last time your mom got surrounded by your embrace?)". Lu's word is similar to Lee Zongsheng's lyrics from "The Hills(山丘)". Depending on the plot, Ivan's reply is not just a question, but also an emotion. Therefore, the translator uses the famous singer Beyonce who sings the song Halo which is about embrace in order to reflect Ivan's mood and makes it clear to foreign audiences.

(8) ST: 你觉得她那个样子长得像个抢劫犯吗

TT: She is Natasha, not the Black Widow!

In this statement, the word "she" refers to Natasha who is a beautiful Russian and studies ancient Chinese in China. This question is asked by Ivan Xu to his mother Xiaohua Lu when he wants to emphasize that the girl Natasha is like kind rather than his mother's suspicions. Coincidentally, Black Widow is also played by an actress called Natasha. The translation doesn't detract from the cultural connotation, and it achieves the effect of the comedy.

(9) ST: 一江春水向东流吧

TT: Hakuna Matata!

This statement is uttered by Natasha when she plans to forget everything and moves on. In order to convey Natasha's words and achieve the comic humor, the translator borrows the lines from *The Lion King*. Because of learning ancient Chinese, Natasha's lines contain many idioms and poems in the movie. Besides that, there are some words like “物是人非(Once Upon a Time in America)”, “孝顺(be a good son)” and “头上三尺有神明(God will be watching you!)” etc.

(10) ST: 你是在背乘法口诀吗

TT: Are you writing a poem here?

In this statement, the translator replaces the text “背乘法口诀” with the phrase “writing a poem”. She may consider that the foreigners couldn't understand the implication of the real “multiplication tables” in the statement. This word is asked by Ivan Xu to his mother Xiaohua Lu when she talks endlessly with some four-character idioms. Therefore, the “poem” shows the language arts and the cultural connotation in the context.

### C. Communicative Dimension

The last dimension is the communicative dimension, which emphasizes the interpersonal intentions. In this dimension, the translator cares more about how to communicate with the target readers. Gengshen Hu believes that the translator should “focus on the communicative level of selection transformation, and pay attention to whether the communicative intention in the ST can be expressed in the translation” (Gengshen Hu, 2004:138). There are a lot of difficult four-character idioms and oral expressions in the film, and the proper translation will achieve win-win results. For example:

#### 1. The transformation of the four-character idioms

(11) ST: 就像我们这样 露水姻缘

你是想说萍水相逢吧

其实应该是一丘之貉

TT: Just like us, like Jack and Rose.

You mean Shrek and Donkey?

Actually, it is Leon and Mathilda.

This statement is uttered by Natasha when she tries to approach Ivan. The translation of the three components comes from three famous films and references their characters. “露水姻缘” is translated as “Jack and Rose” here, it means that Natasha describes her relationship with Ivan like Jack and Rose in the Titanic-that is-falling in love at first sight. And “萍水相逢” is translated as “Shrek and Donkey” who are the characters from Shrek, this means that the relationship of Natasha and Ivan is as pure as Shrek and Donkey. As for “一丘之貉”, it is translated as “Leon and Mathilda” from the Leon. Here Natasha expresses her sympathy and similar experience with Ivan, and at the same time, implies that they will never be together in the end. It is very interesting that the translator cites the characters from three classic films to translate the cultural words and achieve the humor.

(12) ST: 警钟长鸣啊 徐伊万

你不要在外面猫三狗四的 横七竖八的 做了一堆不着四六的事情

最后搞得乱七八糟 一塌糊涂的

TT: Ivan, stay alert!

Stop messing around, fooling around, and playing around.

You can scatter around but not goof around.

This statement is uttered by Xiaohua Lu to Ivan Xu when she is teaching him to be a good man. The translator is very flexible to translate this series of idioms, so that the TT is concise and rhyming like a poem.

(13) ST: 他们正在床上兴风作浪, 你知道吗? 结果被我爸爸瓮中捉鳖

TT: My dad ambushed them when they were rolling in the deep on bed.

This statement is said by Natasha to tell Ivan Xu the reason why she broke up with her boyfriend. The translator uses the two verbs “ambush” and “roll” to show the situation about “兴风作浪” and “瓮中捉鳖”. And it makes the viewers know what happened to them.

#### 2. The transformation of the colloquial language

(14) ST: 亲生的啊

TT: Like mother, like son.

This statement is uttered by the trainman when he feels that Ivan and Xiaohua have the same temperament that both of them are very stubborn. And in later plots, Xiaohua also says “你跟你爸一个德行你(Like father, like son!)” to Ivan. The translator uses the word “like” to make the TT colloquial so that the audience can be well understood.

(15) “大铁锁”

a. ST: 大铁锁是怎么回事

TT: What's with the lock?

b. ST: 什么大铁锁啊

TT: What lock?

a. ST: 大铁锁

TT: The gigantic lock!

a. ST: 密码锁下面上了一把大铁锁

TT: There's a ferocious lock under the code lock.

The statements are uttered between Ivan and his mother. To get his passport, he goes home but finds that there is an iron lock on the door besides the code lock. And then he has to meet his mother to get the key. Later, the quarrel begins between them. From “the lock”, “the gigantic lock” to “a ferocious lock”, we can feel Ivan's frustration and anger in ST And TT. The translator effectively conveys Ivan's emotion and achieves the communicative dimension.

(16) ST: 不要再搞我了好吗

不要再折磨我了好吗

不要再侮辱我了好吗

踏踏实实坐到底好吗

可以不可以

好还是不好

TT: Stop messing with me, ok?

Stop torturing me, ok?

Stop insulting me, ok?

Stay still till the end, ok?

OK or not OK?

Yes or No?

This statement is uttered by Ivan when his mother gets off the train alone. He is very angry and asks several questions in succession. To reflect his tone, the translator also uses a series of translation to make the TT colloquial.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

With the deepening of globalization, China has had a greater discourse power in the economic and political field and the soft power of culture has become one of the key areas of competition. Therefore, the export of cultural production has become not only a driver for economic growth but also an important channel for the outside world to know about China (Chenyang Yang, 2019, p.1). Besides the quality of the films themselves, the poor export of Chinese films also lies in the quality of translation. However, there are not so many excellent translators in the Chinese film industry, what's more, the market of translation is not standardized. Therefore, it is necessary to make a breakthrough in translation.

Eco-translatology embodies the integrity of ecological environment under the principles of language dimension, culture dimension and communication dimension. Based on the analysis of the English subtitles of *Lost in Russia*, the translator has chosen effectively in “adaptive selection” and “selective adaptation”. According to the current situation and demand of Chinese films, the government should strengthen the training of translators and speed up the formation and standardization of the translation mechanism. As for translators, when they are translating film subtitles, they should create more funny jokes, highlight the characteristics and reduce the difficulties to adapt to the ecological environment of the film. What's more, it is also significant for translators to improve their cultural accomplishment and apply eco-translatology to their future work.

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