

Study on Subtitle Translation of *Chang'an* from the Perspective of Adaption Theory

Yao Wang*

College of Foreign Languages, Guilin University of Technology, Guilin, 541000, China

* Corresponding author: Yao Wang (Email: 1666426392@qq.com)

Abstract: As international cultural exchanges become closer and closer, film is particularly important as a bridge of cultural communication, showing a booming trend. Subtitle translation is one of the important factors for a film to go global. High-quality subtitle translation can enhance the viewing experience of overseas audiences and deepen their understanding of the culture involved in the film, thus promoting cultural exchange. The film *Chang'an* is a great success because of its beautiful picture and wonderful story content, which is loved by the audience. This paper analyses the adaptation in the subtitle translation of *Chang'an* from the perspective of adaptation theory, in terms of context and language with examples. It explores how subtitle translation can balance the differences in language and culture between the two countries, so that subtitle translation can better serve film and television works.

Keywords: Adaption Theory, Subtitle Translation, *Chang'an*.

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the continuous emergence of high-quality Chinese animations, the entire industry has witnessed vigorous development. The popular film *Chang'an* is the first work of Light Chaser Animation's New Culture series. It was released during the summer of 2023 and has now become the third highest-grossing animated film in Chinese cinema history, earning numerous accolades. The film centers on the decades-long friendship between Gao Shi and Li Bai, presenting the audience with the transformation of the Tang Dynasty from its golden age to its decline following the An Shi Rebellion. Through its magnificent and fantastical visuals, familiar poems, and a panorama of Tang Dynasty poets, it immerses viewers in the brilliant atmosphere of the Tang era, winning their hearts. To accurately convey the charm and beauty of Tang poetry, the creation team of *Chang'an* invited Australian best-selling author and critic Linda Jaivin to translate the film's subtitle. With over four decades of experience in the Chinese and English cultural fields, Jaivin has completed English subtitle translations for numerous Chinese films, including *Farewell My Concubine*, *Forever Enthralled*, *To Live*, *The Grandmaster* and almost all the films of Light Chaser Animation. This article will conduct an in-depth analysis of *Chang'an* from the perspective of the Adaptation Theory, exploring the adaptation issues in the English subtitles of the film in terms of context and language structure.

2. Overview of Adaptation Theory

Adaptation Theory is one of the significant theories in pragmatics, aiming to study the adaptation mechanisms in the process of language use. Proposed by Verschueren, this theory emphasizes that language users need to constantly adjust their language use in the communication process to adapt to the changing language environment. The core concept of Adaptation Theory is language adaptation, which means that language users can flexibly choose different language forms in different contexts to meet the communication needs. The

essence of translation lies in the conversion of meaning between different languages to achieve the purpose of cross-cultural communication[1]. From the perspective of Adaptation Theory, translation is a process in which translators continuously and reasonably choose translation strategies based on internal and external factors to adapt to the target language context, and through language conversion, achieve the behavior of cross-cultural communication [2]. Translators can make the best language choices because language has variability, negotiability and adaptability. Variability means that language has multiple possibilities of choice, providing a broad space for translators to exert their creativity. Negotiability explains how to make choices, while adaptability explains the reasons or purposes of the choices. Such choices made by translators are reflected not only in language structure but also in the language context level[3].

According to Verschueren's view, the adaptability features in language use are manifested in four aspects: the contextual correlates of adaptability, the structural objects of adaptability, the dynamics of adaptability, and the silence of the adaptation process[4]. First, the contextual correlates of adaptability refers to the adaptation to the physical world, social world and psychological world in the communication context. Context is the environment of language use, and context adaptation means that language choices must be adapted to the communication context. The structural objects of adaptability is to allow translators to make choices from aspects such as phonetics, vocabulary and sentences to achieve the best translation effect to the greatest extent; dynamic adaptation refers to the continuous adjustment and change of language in the language use process to adapt to various contexts and language structures. This dynamics of adaptability can make language choices adapt to the communication context and achieve the best communication effect. This article will mainly discuss how context and language structure make adaptations in the process of language choice.

3. Analyses of the Subtitle Translation in *Chang'an*

3.1. Contextual Correlates of Adaptability

3.1.1. Adaptability to the Cultural Context

Throughout the long history of mankind, every nation has developed its own unique historical allusions, customs and ways of thinking. These distinctive cultural backgrounds are the sediment of a nation's long-term development, recognized by the people of that nation, but relatively unfamiliar to other cultures. Therefore, translators should have a comprehensive understanding of the cultural content of the film to adapt to the target language culture, and use the expressions familiar to the target language culture to help the audience better grasp the information of the film.

Example 1:

SL: 拜见公主。

TL: Your Highness.

Example 2:

SL: 圣上在陕州

TL: His Majesty is in Shanzhou.

Example 3:

SL: 都是催促中丞引军出关

TL: urging Your Excellency to lead your army

Example 1 is what Wang Wei said when he met Princess Yuzhen. "Your Highness" is a respectful form of address used directly to members of the royal family in English. Princess Yuzhen was the ninth daughter of Emperor Ruizong Li Dan of the Tang Dynasty and a member of the royal family. It is reasonable to translate it as "Your Highness" here, which conforms to the cultural context of the West. In examples 2 and 3, "His Majesty" and "Your Excellency" are fixed expressions in English. The former is used to respectfully address an emperor, and the latter is used to address high-ranking officials or diplomats. Conforming to the target language culture can evoke psychological resonance in the target language audience, making the work more deeply resonate with them.

Example 4:

SL: 攀龙不成

TL: I didn't win the Emperor's favor

Example 5:

SL: 叩天子门

TL: serve the Emperor

Examples 4 and 5 also demonstrate the adaptation to cultural context. "攀龙不成" and "叩天子门" do not carry their literal meanings. In Western culture, emperors are not associated with the image of a dragon, nor do they have the connotation of being the son of heaven. Therefore, translating "龙" and "天子" as "Emperor" more straightforwardly conveys the original meaning. Example 4 directly conveys the original meaning through free translation. In example 5, "叩天子门" does not mean literally knocking on a door but rather taking a position under the emperor and serving him. Thus, translating it as "serve the Emperor" can help the target language audience accurately grasp the dialogue content of the film.

Example 6:

SL: 在洞庭湖畔，力如万钧，一步杀一贼。

TL: By Dongting Lake, strong as an ox, killing thieves with one blow.

"钧" is an ancient Chinese unit of measurement, where

15kg equals one "钧". "万钧" symbolizes immense weight or strength. In Western culture, there is no direct equivalent for this unit of weight. Therefore, the translation employs a free translation to render "力如万钧" into "strong as an ox." The term "ox" is used metaphorically in English to describe qualities of great strength or tenacity. By adopting free translation, the translator addresses lexical gaps and facilitates the transformation of Chinese cultural elements into a form more accessible to English-speaking audiences. This method enhances the comprehensibility and relatability of the film content, particularly regarding the characteristics of Gao Shi.

3.1.2. Adaptability to the Situational Context

Example 7:

SL: 好个贼人/身手不错

TL: Damn thief/ You're skilled.

Li Bai first encountered Gao Shi at Dongting Lake. When Li Bai was robbed by bandits, he made a remark after fighting with them but failing to recover his lost possessions. The translator did not opt for translation symbols that directly correspond to the semantic representation of the original dialogue, instead making choices that may seem unrelated. This is because literal translation would deviate from the social context of the target language. In this instance, Li Bai is not genuinely praising the bandits for their skills. A literal translation would violate the principle of communicative adaptability, which emphasizes that the ultimate purpose of language use is to convey intended meanings effectively. Considering the film context, translating "Damn" intensifies the tone, fully demonstrating Li Bai's anger and condemnation, while also aligning with the cultural context of the target language.

Example 8:

SL: 你心中的一团锦绣，终有脱口而出的一日。

TL: That splendid talent of yours will one day burst forth from your heart.

In the film, Gao Shi came to Yangzhou to keep his one-year appointment with Li Bai. After a martial arts contest with Pei Twelve, the indignant Gao Shi inadvertently overcame his stuttering problem. At the moment of parting, Li Bai said this line to him, which contained blessings and encouragement for Gao Shi. The previous text mentioned that although Gao Shi was an expert with a spear, he had great difficulty in reading. At this time, Gao Shi had not yet demonstrated his talent as a poet, nor had he achieved any fame or success. "锦绣" in Chinese originally means silk fabric, but here the translator rendered it as "splendid talent", which is more in line with the plot of the film: after their parting, Gao Shi went to the frontier, and soon his frontier poems began to circulate in the world, showcasing his talent as a poet.

3.2. Structural Objects of Adaptability

Structural adaptability refers to the adaptive selection of linguistic factors in verbal communication, including any language structure at any organizational level and the principles followed in the organization process, such as the selection of language, code and style, as well as constituent elements and construction principles at various grammatical levels. The structural adaptability mainly includes adaptability on phonetic level, lexical level and syntactic level. From the perspective of language structure, Chinese is a typical language of parataxis, while English is a typical language of hypotaxis. Therefore, the dialogue in Chinese-language films shows the characteristics of parataxis, with

sentence construction using seamless coherence, and the logical relationship of events is highlighted through word order or lexical arrangement. For instance, zero-form cohesion (or implicit cohesion) is frequently used in Chinese subtitles; while English subtitles have a strong morphological function, and grammatical meanings are often expressed through obvious and standardized morphological changes, such as conjunctions, functional words, clauses and subordinate clauses, with complete structures and meanings carried by morphology. In subtitle translation, for the differences in language structure, such as the selection of language, code and style, as well as the choice of constituent elements and construction principles at various grammatical levels, efforts should be made to conform to the expression habits of English. This awareness of adaptation stems from the consideration of the dynamic nature of adaptation, that is, the selection of language structure should be in line with the target context, and the selection of different language structures will also, in turn, affect the context.

3.2.1. Adaptability on the Phonetic Level

The adaptability on phonetics means that the translator follows the pronunciation rules of the original text to make the subtitle content as close as possible to the phonetic features of the original text. When translating dialogues, adhering to the original pronunciation principles as much as possible at the phonetic level not only enhances the interest and cultural nature of film subtitle translation but also more clearly conveys the source language's cultural information directly to foreign audiences.

Example 9:

SL: 春眠不觉晓/处处闻啼鸟

TL: Deep sleeps of spring/ all around me birds sing.

In Example 9, "spring" and "sing" form an end rhyme, maintaining the original poem's rhythm. Additionally, through the interlaced use of stressed syllables (e.g., "deep," "sleeps") and light syllables (e.g., "of"), the translation creates a strong-weak rhythm that enhances the poem's expressiveness and appeal. The translation of this poem presents a gentle and soothing rhythm, with its steady tone making the verse smooth and serene, echoing the tranquility of spring and the singing of birds. While keeping the subtitles concise, translators strive to preserve the phonetic beauty of the translation.

3.2.2. Adaptability on the Lexical Level

Lexical adaptability in subtitle translation involves adjusting the source language terms in accordance with the expression habits of the target language to ensure that the subtitles are in harmony with the scenes. The film *Chang'an* contains many culture-loaded words, such as the frequently mentioned "高中丞" in the movie. In the Tang Dynasty, "中丞" was the deputy chief of the Imperial Censorate, a position of the fourth rank. Excessively complex cultural connotations can increase the burden on the audience to understand the film. Therefore, the translator directly omits this term with strong Chinese cultural connotation in the English subtitles to reduce the interference of the subtitles on the audio-visual experience and simply translates it as "Governor Gao" for the convenience of Western audiences' understanding. Similarly, "府君", "三镇节度使", "淮南节度使" were all translated as "governor". "重将", "将军", and "元帅" were translated as "general".

3.2.3. Adaptability on the Syntactic Level

Because Chinese and English belong to different language families, they each have unique vocabularies and grammatical rules. These differences may lead to an inability to achieve equivalence at the lexical level between the two languages. Therefore, in the process of subtitle translation, the translator should make corresponding adjustments based on the language context, such as flexibly deleting or adjusting the sentence structure, to conform to the language context of the target language[5].

Example 10:

SL: 我许了个愿/要将他的遗骨移去一处天地灵秀之所在/好好安葬。

TL: I made a pledge/ to take his remains somewhere beautiful/ and bury him there.

Example 11:

SL: 他原居四川/当时正云游天下干谒诸侯/希望能遇见一位伯乐/将他举荐朝廷/为国效力。

TL: He used to live in Sichuan/ but was wandering the land courting officials/ in the hope one would recognise his talent/ and commend him to the court/ so he could serve the country.

Example 12:

SL: 总有一日我要投身道法/寻修仙之道, 长生之法。

TL: One day I'll devote myself to the Tao/ I'll discover the path to immortality.

Adhering to the economy principle of subtitle texts is the primary rule that subtitle translators should follow. In some film and television scenarios, subtitles cannot be fully translated like other literary works. Especially when the syntax of movie dialogues is complex or the information is too much, the translator should adapt to the plot development and audio-visual restrictions, remove the unimportant elements in the original dialogue, and convey the main meaning and stylistic information of the dialogue with concise language. In Example 10, the original text has three clauses and three verbs. The translator fully considers the colloquial characteristics of subtitles, using the conjunction "and" to connect two clauses and processing the second clause as an infinitive, which makes the translation more compact. In Example 11, the structure of original text is relatively loose with multiple clauses. When translating into English, the translator adds corresponding connecting means to clarify the logical relationship. In Example 12, the translator combines "修仙之道" and "长生之法" into "path to immortality", making the translation more concise and simplifying the information, which helps the target language audience better understand the film.

Example 13:

SL: 高兄学姜太公钓鱼啊。

TL: Fishing with straight hooks like Duke Jiang?

Example 14:

SL: 先皇崇信道法

TL: His Majesty Xuan Zong believed in the Tao.

Example 15:

SL: 偷我马匹行囊/还不是贼

TL: You steal my horse and bags/ and you're no thief?

Example 16:

SL: 出川之后无意之间在庐山相遇。

TL: After I left Sichuan, I ran into him at Mt Lu.

The above four examples use the amplification to add some words or short phrases during translation to more accurately convey the meaning contained in the original text. In example

13, "姜太公" is a figure in Chinese mythology. The story of Jiang Taigong fishing with a straight hook without bait is well-known, but foreign audiences lack this information. Therefore, the translator adds "with straight hooks" to supplement this key information, making the connotation more complete and also helping the target language audience understand Chinese culture. In example 14, Inspector Cheng and Gao Shi talked about the Tao. They use "His Majesty" to respectfully address the emperor, but at the same time, it may cause ambiguity, as the two also mentioned the current emperor many times in their conversation, and the translation is also "His Majesty". Therefore, to make a distinction, the translator added "Xuan Zong" later to avoid ambiguity. Examples 15 and 16 reflect the different characteristics of Chinese and English. In Chinese expressions, the subject can be omitted or hidden according to specific circumstances, such as when the subject is clear from the context or when there are multiple subjects. Unlike Chinese, the subject is an indispensable important component of an English sentence. When translating Chinese sentences without a subject or with a subject omitted, it is necessary to add a subject to make it more in line with English expression habits and make the logical relationship of the sentence clearer, which is helpful for understanding the content of the film.

Example 17:

SL: 化而为鸟，其名为鹏。

TL: It transforms into a bird. That's called the Eagle.

This sentence exemplifies a typical classical Chinese structure, characterized by its simplicity while also reflecting the flexibility of Chinese syntax, which is not constrained by rigid subject-predicate relationships. The first sentence, "化而为鸟", is a non-subject sentence, with the implied subject being "鹏" mentioned in the preceding context. To adhere to the grammatical requirements of the target language, the translator has introduced the pronoun "it" to form a complete sentence. The second sentence employs an object-predicate structure, a distinctive feature of classical Chinese, often used to enhance linguistic expression and rhythm. Typically, this structure would be rendered as "鹏为其名". In Chinese, active voice is predominant, but during translation, the translator opted for a passive construction "be called" to better

align with the syntactic norms of the target language.

4. Conclusion

By analyzing the characteristics of the English subtitles of the film *Chang'an from* from the perspective of the Adaptation Theory, this paper finds that regardless of whether the original subtitles are long or short, concise or complex, the subtitle translation has made significant adjustments to a large extent. Moreover, the same translation demonstrates its adaptability in multiple aspects. For instance, the same example sentence not only adopts various translation strategies to achieve adaptation at the language structure but also fully considers the cultural differences between different countries to achieve adaptation in the context. In the background of globalization, films and television provide a platform for cultural exchange and dissemination among different nations and ethnic groups. When translating domestic films, translators should base themselves on their own culture and reasonably select translation methods and strategies to help the target language audience better understand the connotations of the film and television works. In addition, translators should also fully consider different language structures and context changes to meet the needs of both communicators.

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