

Chinese-English Translation of Extralinguistic Cultural References in Subtitles from the Perspective of Relevance Theory: A Case Study of *Legend of Deification*

Yuan Zhou^{1*}, Yue Zhu¹

¹Department of Foreign Studies, North China Electric Power University, Baoding, Hebei, China

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*Corresponding author: Yuan Zhou

Department of Foreign Studies, North China Electric Power University, Baoding, Hebei, China

Abstract

Proposed by Danish scholar Jan Pedersen, Extralinguistic Cultural Reference is a model concerned with cultural words in film and television subtitles, offering new ideas for the study of cultural word translation in subtitles. Guided by Relevance Theory, this paper analyzes the translation of Extralinguistic Cultural References in the subtitles of *Legend of Deification*. It is found that the interventional strategies are more used than the minimal change strategies in the ECR translation of the animated film. This paper argues that when translating cultural words in subtitles, translators should take into full consideration the differences between Chinese and Western cultures to give the foreign audience access to a better understanding of the culture in films. Hopefully, it can provide some practical suggestions for cultural word translation in similar mythological animated films.

Keywords: Relevance Theory, Extralinguistic Cultural Reference, *Legend of Deification*, Subtitle Translation, C-E Translation, Interventional Strategies.

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1. Definition of Extralinguistic Cultural References

It is necessary to clarify what Extralinguistic Cultural Reference (ECR) concerns before specific translation strategies analysis. So this part introduces its definition, explores the multiple factors influencing the choice of ECR translation strategies, and reviews previous studies.

The concept of ECR was first introduced by Pedersen (2005) in his paper "How is Culture Rendered in Subtitles". He (2011) defines it as follows: "Extralinguistic Cultural Reference is defined as a reference that is attempted by means of any cultural linguistic expression, which refers to an extralinguistic entity or process. The referent of the said expression may prototypically be assumed to be identifiable to a relevant audience as this referent is within the encyclopaedic knowledge of this audience."

In other words, their existence in the world is not dependent on verbal signs though ECRs appear as linguistic representations. They can be real or virtual, becoming a subconscious convention in a particular culture. For example, the real Peking University or the fictional entity such as Sun Wukong (Chen, 2020).

Because language is a product of culture, basically every word in a language is related to culture in one way or another. Nevertheless, not all culturally relevant words or references are problematic to understand or cannot be found equivalent concepts in other cultures. ECRs, on the other hand, refer to linguistic expressions familiar to specific groups of people with a deep cultural context behind them because they are rooted in that particular culture and carried down from generation to generation and become part of the encyclopedic knowledge of a particular audience.

2. Previous Studies on Extralinguistic Cultural References Translation

2.1 Previous studies on Extralinguistic Cultural References translation abroad

Recent related research has focused on the translation effects of ECRs in subtitles. Modarresi and Forutan (2018) explore the translation of official and unofficial versions of Hollywood films and find that translators have different attitudes and preferences in translating culturally taboo language. Sadeghpour (2021) examines the expression of humorous ECRs in English animated comedy in Persian dubbed and subtitled translations and concludes that the dubbed version

conveys the humor effect better than the subtitled version.

There are, of course, related studies that have explored this across disciplines. Aasebø and Willbergh (2022) research the issue of teaching cultural references in intercultural teaching. They conclude from a case study of two Norwegian primary and secondary schools that teaching with a combination of universal and specific cultural references can demonstrate different areas of the human condition and thus contribute to the empowerment of all students.

In conclusion, after Pedersen proposed the ECRs model, foreign studies have explored its integration with various fields. However, fewer studies have combined the guiding theory with the practical application of the model. Therefore, this paper is dedicated to combining the model with theory, choosing to explore the subtitle translation of ECRs under Relevance Theory and providing a new perspective for its translation research. The applicability of Relevance Theory to its translation will be elaborated in the next chapter.

2.2 Previous studies on Extralinguistic Cultural References translation at home

Compared to foreign countries, fewer scholars in China have studied the concept of ECRs.

The first to apply ECRs to the analysis of Chinese subtitle translation is Zhang Qiulin (2011), who studies the translation strategy of ECRs in the subtitles of the famous film *Confucius* and concludes that the film's strategy was mainly target language oriented. By classifying typical ECRs in the collected data, Wang Wen (2022) finds that translators should focus on information transmission in the translation process and that conditions permitting Chinese culture should be preserved to the maximum.

In recent years, domestic research has mainly focused on translation strategies, with a relatively small variety of selected cases and a limited depth and breadth of research. There have been many domestic studies in cultural content translation, but there are also many problems, one of which is the lack of direction (Cao, 2017). Most studies use terms proposed for literary translation, such as "culture-loaded words" and "culture-specific items". Pedersen's model of ECR, however, is a more specific terminology for subtitle translation issues.

The number of Chinese films going to the international market has increased recently. Overall, the quality of English subtitles for Chinese films in the domestic market is uneven. There is also an odd phenomenon that English subtitles often accompany Chinese films released in China, but Chinese audiences do not need such bilingual subtitles when watching them. Instead, high-quality bilingual subtitles should be

available in overseas markets to show the charm of Chinese culture.

For the above reasons, this paper analyzes the ECRs translation of English subtitles in Chinese films hoping to promote excellent Chinese culture abroad.

3. Significance of Extralinguistic Cultural References Translation in Film Subtitles guided by Relevance Theory

Many people nowadays prefer to get to know the cultures of other countries through film productions. The storylines, pictures, and dialogues of characters in a film carry different cultural information. So as a vital entertainment form in people's life, the film is increasingly becoming an effective means of cross-cultural communication.

Through centuries of development, specific cultural words have a unique connotation rarely found in other countries. Because of the difference in cultural backgrounds between the translated and the original, a specific film element may be perceived variously by the audience in different Eastern and Western contexts. It is difficult for the target audience to understand film subtitles fully, thus affecting communication effectiveness. So for the target audience to better understand the culture of the original language, the translation of films should be able to convey the cultural information adequately. Only in this way can effective cross-cultural communication be carried out.

Against Chinese films going global, some translations of cultural words fail to transmit cultural information to the target audience, hindering the export of Chinese cultural products. Therefore, how to transmit cultural connotations effectively in subtitles is worth studying. In order to alleviate the understanding barriers caused by cultural differences, cultural word translation needs to consider the bilingual socio-cultural contexts when shifting between languages. Recognizing the importance and challenge of translating cultural content in subtitles, Swedish scholar Pedersen proposes the Extralinguistic Cultural Reference model related to the cultural items in subtitles. It refers to an extralinguistic entity or process though appearing as linguistic signs. Furthermore, it can be a real or virtual convention recognized by the relevant audience in a particular culture.

As a representative of quality Chinese animated films in recent years, *Legend of Deification*, adapted from Chinese myths, has many ECRs. Although the film has been translated into English, the translation of some cultural words does not transmit the message adequately. According to the features and constraints of subtitle translation, subtitling needs to build a harmonious relationship with the image, the text, and the audience. (Xiao, 2012) Against this situation, this paper discusses

the translation of ECRs in *Legend of Deification*, hoping to provide references for the translation of similar works.

Relevance Theory is a theory in cognitive pragmatics. In *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, Sperber and Wilson (2001) first propose the theory. In 1995, the second edition of the book was released, building upon the foundation of the first edition. It clarified several concepts, thereby enhancing the theoretical framework. Since then, Relevance Theory has been applied in many fields, including “discourse analysis, media discourse research, literary research, translation research, verbal humor research” (Xue & Wang, 2012).

In recent years, Relevance Theory has been increasingly utilized in the translation of various domains, including films, television programs, literary works, advertisements, and humor. Current research trends indicate that applying Relevance Theory to the study of translation in the realms of film and cultural elements is a viable approach. Therefore, by integrating the analysis of cultural elements and movie subtitle translation through the lens of Relevance Theory, this paper presents a novel research perspective.

4. Application of Relevance Theory to Extralinguistic Cultural References Translation in *Legend of Deification*

This part will present a case study based on the translation strategies of ECRs. Pedersen (2011) attempts to sum up seven categories in terms of translation results: retention, specification, direct translation, generalization, substitution, omission, and official equivalent. The first three are source-oriented, while the middle three are target-oriented. Official equivalent is a special one. Regarding the translation process, strategies are simplified into three categories: minimal change strategies, interventional strategies, and omission.

4.1 The minimal change strategies

The minimal change strategies would be retention, official equivalent, and direct translation, as they add no new material to the translated. In the case of mythological audiovisual works, the unique and wonderfully exotic style is the most important part that arouses the curiosity of the audience. When completing the translation shift, the translators must be aware of the differences between the original language and the target language and relay messages with respect for the reading habits of the audience (Pedersen, 2011). Some examples are analyzed in the following sections.

4.1.1 Direct translation

When using direct translation, no information is removed or added to the target language. When the original language and the target language express the same thing or concept, direct translation can be used if there is no significant gap in understanding. The only thing that is changed in direct translation is the language,

not the semantics of the dialogues. The translation into corresponding English according to the actual meaning of ECR has the advantages of being clear, concise, and direct.

Example 1:

ST: 九尾狐妖

TT: The Fox Devil, Nine Tailed

“九尾狐妖” is the name of the most important demon in the film. The designation of demons in mythological works is often intended to indicate their nature, echo their image, or indicate their magical power in the scene. Here the translation clearly conveys the same meaning as the original that the demon is portrayed as a fox with nine tails. As the most basic translation method, direct translation preserves the characteristics of the source language as far as possible so that readers can understand the meaning of the source culture and fully appreciate the exotic atmosphere (Xiong, 2014). The exoticism of the words is preserved in the translation, so the target language audience spends more effort mobilizing the context than the source language audience. However, as a reward, the target language audience also feels the exotic beauty that the source language audience cannot experience, so they get more contextual effects. The target language audience’s extra effort and the extra contextual effect offset each other, so the translation here achieves the appropriate level of relevance. The translators here take into account the language style of the original language when recognizing the convenience that the film images bring to the understanding of the subtitles. Combined with the film screen, the translation not only makes the message of the name clear, but also helps the target audience to accurately grasp the characteristic of this demon.

4.1.2 Retention

Here the source language is retained in the subtitle unchanged or slightly adapted to meet target language requirements. Retention is the most source-oriented strategy, as it allows elements from the source language to enter the target language. Retention can be used when it comes to the names of people, places, etc. Retention is essentially the same as transliteration, i.e. the phonetic translation of Chinese characters using similarly pronounced English letters. Through pinyin, the ECR is retained directly in English text.

Example 2:

ST: 静虚宫派大弟子姜子牙

TT: Jingxu Hall’s foremost disciple, Jiang Ziya

“静虚宫” is the palace of gods in the film. It is not a real place but a fictional one made up for mythology without a specific counterpart in reality. Chinese audience can well understand this name without too much explanation, but for the foreign audience without an encyclopaedic background, it is unfamiliar. Therefore, according to the linguistic equivalence

requirement, a combination of direct translation and transliteration is used here, with “静虚” being translated as “Jingxu” and “宫” as “Hall” so that audience can naturally understand.

“姜子牙” is the name of the main character, which is directly translated as “Jiang Ziya”. In the movie, the name “姜子牙” appears many times, and even the original name “姜尚” appears. Chinese audiences are very knowledgeable about the mythological archetype of Jiang Ziya, so the repetition serves to the theme. While the information available to foreign viewers is only pinyin, they can only know that this is the name of the main character by virtue of the plot, which will cause reading fatigue if repeated many times. Therefore, the translators make different changes to ensure the accuracy of messages depending on contexts and adopt the way of weakening the unfamiliar idea several times to reduce the cognitive barrier. By converting them into such phrases as “So loyal.”, “Come on!” and “Insolence!”, the unfamiliar concept is matched with the image (Chang, 2022). This prevents the repetition from affecting the viewing experience of the foreign audience. The translators here do not stick to the surface form of mechanical equivalence and word-for-word translation, but flexibly adapts according to the context by emphasizing the functional equivalence of the translated text and reducing the audience’s processing efforts, which is precisely what is emphasized by the translation concept of the correlation theory.

4.2 The interventional strategies

The interventional strategies would be specification, generalization and substitution, as they supply the target viewers with more or other information to help them access the ECRs. Omission has here been placed on the sideline. It could be said that it is closer to being interventional than minimal change in nature, as translators intervene to remove a troublesome ECR, thus helping the viewers access the utterance (Pedersen, 2011).

4.2.1 Specification

In the specification, more information hidden in the original text or culture is added, making the subtitled ECR more specific. This is done by fleshing out a name or an acronym or by adding more semantic content, such as an addition to someone’s occupation. When some ECRs are challenging to find corresponding English words to express, or when a literal translation is not sufficient to convey their cultural meaning, this approach can be used to add implicit information to make the ECR easier to understand. But the major drawback of this strategy is space consumption.

Example 3:

ST: 你连鱼都能放了，就不能放自己一马。

TT: They get to go home, meanwhile we’re rooted to the spot! I’ll do it!

Due to the different cultural backgrounds of domestic and foreign audiences, their cognitive habits are also different. Translators can reason to know the degree and scope of cultural omission in the conversion between the original language and the translated language. Thus, translators can add some information to compensate for this, which can minimize the cognitive effort of foreign audiences when they watch the movie and make them get the best contextual effect.

The phrase “放自己一马” is an adaptation of “放你一马”. The latter “放你一马” is from Romance of the Three Kingdoms. It means to show mercy and let your mistake go. The former “放自己一马” is to let go of one’s mistakes and go on as if nothing has happened. However, the translation here chooses to avoid the literal meaning. It is to urge Jiang Ziya to admit his mistake quickly, and only when Jiang Ziya lets go of his heart’s obsession can they return to the Jingxu Hall. Translators choose to reproduce the equivalent content, expressing Shen’s complaint against Jiang Ziya and meaning that all the others have gone home, but they remain in the same place. Such transformation shows that the translators fully understand the sentence. At the same time, the audience can understand the subtitle very well.

4.2.2 Substitution

By substitution, the original ECR is replaced by the related ECR of the target language, the other cultural ECR of the original language, or content that is entirely unrelated but fits the context. In other words, where appropriate translation cannot be achieved by conventional means, translators can flexibly use other methods to make various degrees of partial modifications or alternative translations of the original text. By handling flexibly, the subtitled messages and communicative intentions of characters can be effectively conveyed.

Example 4:

ST: 你有一颗至善之心

TT: Your sense of the greater good is skewed.

In the film, Jiang Ziya’s master says, “你有一颗至善之心，为师命你亲斩九尾，斩的不是恶，是善”. Master orders Jiang Ziya to kill the Nine Tailed, but Jiang Ziya was compelled by the Nine Tailed when on a mission and almost let it escape. Chinese culture is typically a high-context, more indirect or implicit, so its understanding is heavily context-dependent (Li, 2022). The sentence here is a stark example, and we need to understand the actual intention depending on the context. From the master’s point of view, Jiang Ziya’s action is wrong, so he uses more euphemistic language to point out Jiang Ziya’s mistake. If one only translates the extremely kind heart directly, the target audience may not be able to understand what is conveyed in this sentence in a short time.

Due to the differences in cultural and linguistic backgrounds, the comprehension ability of domestic and foreign viewers is limited by cultural and historical factors. Direct translation of certain subtitles cannot achieve the communicative purpose of the original language subtitles. Therefore, the translators can combine the context with the audience's cultural and linguistic background, using the method of substitution, so that the audience can easily get the full effect of the context and the best connection and understand the communicative purpose of the subtitles. Therefore, substitution is used here to translate the hidden meaning directly to the audience. As a result, the foreign audience can understand the master's true intention through such description.

4.2.3 Generalization

Generalization refers to replacing something specific with something more general. It can be done by expressing sense relations in hyponymy and thus replacing the source language ECR with a superordinate term. Alternatively, it can be done through a paraphrase, where the source language ECR is replaced by a phrase that is generally longer but more or less synonymic. This strategy reduces the difficulty for the target audience to understand subtitles and facilitates the communication of intention.

Example 5:

ST: 人生不如意十有八九

TT: Life squeezes us one way or another.

The phrase is the dialogue spoken by the shop owner to Jiang Ziya, which refers to the fact that many things in our life are often contrary to our expectations, and we should not expect to succeed in everything. The numbers “十” and “八九” mean a large number. Translators do not stick to the linguistic form but express its meaning freely and manifest the communicative purpose so that the foreign audience can understand it at first glance and advance the plot naturally. Especially the verb “squeeze” is used vividly, showing that life is full of trials and setbacks and achieving the same communicative effect as the original. The translators grasp the core content and communicative purpose of the subtitles and reduce the obstacles for foreign viewers to understand through generalization, making the English subtitles more acceptable.

Example 6:

ST: 《姜子牙》

TT: Legend of Deification

Example 6 is the title of the film. A good name of a work affects its promotion and revenue. Therefore, a title should conform to the cultural habits of the audience to attract them and gain the opportunity for cultural dissemination. Translators here translate it as “Legend of Deification” through generalization, which

well illustrates the core story so that the audience without relevant cultural backgrounds can clearly know the theme. If the title is only translated as “Jiang Ziya”, the audience may not be interested in the film, which is not beneficial to its promotion and profitability. While “Legend of Deification” fulfills the communicative purpose and is the best translation.

It can be indicated that translators strive to reproduce the emotion and personality of characters in the original work in conjunction with the translational eco-environment, such as screen and subtitling constraints. Translators reproduce the communicative details between these characters so that the target language audience get the same viewing effect as the source language audience. This translation makes the theme of the movie completely revealed to the audience which reduces the effort of the audience and achieves the best relevance.

5. SUMMARY

According to Relevance Theory, translation is an interlanguage interpretation. In order to make the audience understand the actors' dialogues with minimum effort as soon as possible, it is better to take the audience's cognitive environment as its home. In addition, as popular entertainment, movies should cater to the appreciation level of the general public. A large number of obscure cultural words and unfamiliar expressions will make the movie unmarketable. Translators should understand the original intention correctly according to the principle of optimal relevance, and at the same time make appropriate judgment and estimation of the reader's cognitive environment, and finally adopt appropriate strategies to let the target language readers understand the original author's intention. Successful translation should let the target language readers get the most appropriate understanding with minimum effort and maximum contextual effect.

This paper analyzes the translation of ECRs by analyzing some specific cases in *Legend of Deification*, explores how these ECRs are translated in this mythological work. According to Pedersen's ECR model of the classification of translation strategies, it is found that the interventional strategies are more used than the minimal change strategies in the ECR translation of the animated film *Legend of Deification*. In other words, the translators intervene more in the translation process. The interventional strategies can bring the audience closer to the movie, which will make the movie be liked by more viewers faster. From the previous examples, it can be seen that the interventional strategies have obvious advantages.

The minimal change strategies like direct translation and retention are used in order to be as faithful to the original text as possible. The exoticism of the original language is preserved to avoid the target audience losing their linguistic fantasies about this

mythological film. When considering the cultural connotations and communicative intentions of the source language, translators mainly use interventional strategies. The cultural content and communicative details contained in the ECRs are blurred or concretized through specification, generalization and substitution, so that the audience can grasp the key information and understand the storyline in a limited time and space.

This paper argues that when translating cultural words in subtitles, translators should take into full consideration the differences between Chinese and Western cultures to give the foreign audience access to a better understanding of the culture in films. Due to space and time constraints, this paper only analyzes some typical examples instead of all. So there is still much room for improvement. Hopefully, it can provide some practical suggestions for cultural word translation in similar mythological animated films.

It is hoped that future research will provide a more detailed and objective analysis of the ECR translation and more revised versions to improve the quality of *Legend of Deification*. Ultimately, it is advised that more researches pay attention to the cultural phenomenon in subtitles of mythological audiovisual works and make a more outstanding contribution to the study of ECR translations.

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