

A Study on Subtitle Translation of The Good Stuff from the Perspective of Skopos Theory

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Abstract: The film *The Good Stuff*, directed by female director Shao Yihui, tells the story of two women with vastly different personalities and life circumstances who meet and become friends. Guided by Skopos Theory, this paper studies the subtitle translation strategies of *The Good Stuff*. The study finds that when translating the subtitles of *The Good Stuff*, the translator fully considered the deep expressive intentions behind the language and applied adjustments based on cultural differences to achieve vivid and effective linguistic conversion of the lines, thereby promoting the dissemination of the film.

Keywords: Skopos theory; *The Good Stuff*; Subtitle translation

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1. Introduction

The film *The Good Stuff*, written and directed by Shao Yihui, tells the story of Wang Tiemei, a single mother who moves to a new home with her child, Wang Moli and meets her neighbor Xiao Ye. The two women have distinctly different personalities: one is tough and the other is gentle; one is good at protecting others and the other is good at forgiving others. Facing old traumas and new challenges, they warm and comfort each other. The film achieved great success both at the box office and in terms of critical acclaim in 2024^[1]. The dissemination of good content is inseparable from accurate and ingenious subtitle translation, and the English subtitles of *The Good Stuff* have achieved this effect.

Skopos Theory was developed and proposed by Katharina Reiss and Hans J. Vermeer of the German functionalist school based on functionalist theory^[2]. To address the shortcomings of linguistically oriented theories and other translation theories based on formal equivalence, they put forward a functionalist theory centered on sociocultural purposes^[3]. The primary principle of this theory is the Skopos Theory, which means that the purpose of translation determines the translation process and thus the target text that achieves the intended function. In other words, the motivation behind translation greatly influences the translation methods and techniques used.

2. Overview of Skopos Theory

In the 1970s, German Scholars broke away from the text-centered approach of traditional translation studies and shifted the focus to the target language culture. They began to pay attention to the functions of the target language and the purpose of translation, thereby expanding the perspective of translation studies ^[4]. Katharina Reiss took the lead in classifying texts into three categories based on their functions: informative, expressive, and operative. She pointed out that each category has a different emphasis on the purpose of writing, and translators should adopt different methods to achieve equivalence between the source text and the target text in terms of conceptual content, form, and communicative function. Hans J. Vermeer further argued that translation is a target text created for specific target audiences and purposes in a given context. He emphasized that translators should take the intended purpose of the target text as the starting point of the translation process and choose the optimal translation method based on various contextual factors, rather than focusing on equivalence with the source text. In other words, the “Skopos Theory” is not an option but must guide the translator’s translation strategy.

Vermeer regarded translation as a complex activity. In this activity, translators use new functions, cultural models, and linguistic models in a new context to convey the source language information, while preserving formal features as much as possible. It is not a simple interlingual coding process of words or sentences. On this basis, he proposed the main principles of Skopos Theory: the Skopos Theory, the coherence principle, and the fidelity principle ^[5].

The Skopos Theory mainly means that the target text should conform to the readers’ understanding and reading habits in the target culture and context. However, this principle does not mean that “a good translation must therefore conform to or adapt to the behavioral patterns or expectations of the target language culture” ^[6]. According to the translation purpose and the recipients’ expectations, translators can either reproduce the source language cultural norms or domesticate them into the target language cultural norms. The degree and form of fidelity depend macroscopically on the requirements of the translation purpose.

The coherence principle, also known as intratextual coherence, requires that “the information produced by the translator (the target text) must be interpretable in a way that is coherent with the target recipient’s situation” ^[7]. That is to say, the recipients should be able to understand the target text, which should have a certain meaning in the communicative environment and culture in which it is involved. Only when people consider the received information to be quite consistent with their environment can the information exchange be said to be successful.

The fidelity principle, also called intertextual coherence, similar to the Skopos Theory, emphasizes that intertextual coherence should exist between the source text and the target text, and its form depends on the translator’s understanding of the source text and the purpose of the translation. The fidelity principle is determined by the translation purpose; it can be a certain connection between the target text and the corresponding source text, or it can be a maximum faithful imitation of the source text.

Skopos Theory holds that the fidelity principle is subordinate to the coherence principle, and both the fidelity principle and the coherence principle are subordinate to the Skopos Theory. “If the purpose of translation requires changing the function of the text, the translation standard is no longer intertextual coherence with the source text, but appropriateness or suitability for the purpose.” If the translation purpose requires the target text to reproduce the characteristics and style of the source text, then the fidelity principle is consistent with the Skopos Theory, and the translator will make every effort to reproduce the style, content, and characteristics of the source text ^[8].

3. A study on film subtitle translation

In recent years, the film industry has undergone a rapid transformation, which has facilitated the cross-border and

cross-regional dissemination of ideas and cultures. The demand for the rapid release of films has made dubbing unable to meet audiences' expectations, accelerating the emergence and development of subtitle translation. Consequently, research on film subtitle translation has emerged as a response^[9].

By comparing the differences between film lines and written language, Qian Shaochang proposed that "the social impact of film translation is no less than that of literary translation, as its audience scale is far larger than the latter". He pointed out that film language possesses five characteristics: audibility, immediacy, comprehensiveness, popularity, and non-annotativeness^[10]. Li Yunxing, on the other hand, conducted research on subtitle translation from three key dimensions: time and space constraints, the functions and stylistic features of subtitles, and cultural vocabulary in subtitle translation. He argued that the effectiveness of subtitle translation depends on the ability to provide the most relevant information in the most efficient way, that is, balancing time and space constraints while ensuring the accuracy and cultural adaptability of the translation^[11]. Yang Yan analyzed the technical constraints of subtitle translation and put forward corresponding strategies. She believed that the key to successful film subtitle translation lies in properly balancing the artistic nature of language and the needs and preferences of the target audience. By adopting translation methods that take both aspects into account, cultural exchange can be promoted and existing cultural differences can be bridged^[12].

In general, as a special cultural carrier, films bear a wealth of cultural information, and the differences between Chinese and Western cultures pose certain challenges to the Chinese-to-English translation of subtitles for domestic films. Meanwhile, translators need to consider the linguistic expression habits of the film audience.

4. The application of Skopos Theory in subtitle translation of the film *The Good Stuff*

In *The Good Stuff*, director Shao Yihui once again sets the story in Shanghai, focusing on the lives of several tenants in a Western-style mansion. The film emphasizes character portrayal through dialogue between people, with lines that are colloquial, concise, humorous, and close to real life. It involves the expression of some social and cultural information, and the translator's handling complies with the three basic principles of Skopos Theory. The translated lines naturally connect the plot and effectively drive its development, highlighting the growth of the characters' personalities.

4.1. The Skopos Theory

As the name suggests, the primary principle of Skopos Theory is to clarify the communicative purpose of the source text and adopt appropriate translation strategies to ensure the target text achieves the same purpose. Let's look at an example below.

Example 1

Source text: “小孩儿”

Target text: Momo

In the film, 10-year-old Wang Moli is called “小孩儿” (literally “child”) by her parents, neighbors, and music teacher. However, in English-speaking countries, parents do not often call their children “kid”; thus, a literal translation is inappropriate. Director and screenwriter Shao Yihui explained the origin of this address in a public interview: She is from Taiyuan, Shanxi Province, and her mother used to call her this way when she was a child. In Shanxi, especially in areas like Taiyuan, Jinzhong, and Yangquan, elders use “孩子” (child) or “娃子” (kid) to address children affectionately, which are used far more frequently than given nicknames. Relatives and

friends also use these two terms instead of children's names when talking about them. Through this address, Shao Yihui is also paying tribute to her mother indirectly. Objectively, this form of address serves another purpose—it weakens gender and highlights the subject. “茉莉” (Moli, Jasmine) is a specific address that even reveals gender, but “小孩儿” refers to a child in general; children around the world are “小孩儿” (children) without specific reference to anyone, and it obscures the gender function. Therefore, what the child says is an expression from an independent individual, unaffected by any gender perspective, deconstructing the bias of adults who have been disciplined in a structured society.

To sum up, the address “小孩儿” (literally “child”) in the film stems from the director's own growth experience and also serves the functions of de-gendering and enhancing children's right to speak. Having clarified the purpose of the source text, the translator made a choice. Foreign audiences are not familiar with the linguistic habits of Shanxi and are likely unaware of the story between the creator and her mother, so this layer of meaning would be hard to perceive even if retained. However, as a typical feminist work, the film aims to break the framework of male gaze in mainstream culture and reverse the traditional gender power structure^[13]. Women and children are vulnerable groups in the traditional power structure, and enhancing their right to speak is a common theme in Chinese and foreign films. Therefore, the target text “Momo” also weakens the gender implication of Wang Moli's name and highlights the theme of “breaking gender constraints”.

4.2. The coherence principle

Translators need to maintain not only coherence within the target text but also connect the translation to the audience's cultural context, ensuring the coherent transmission and understanding of information. The application of this principle is exemplified in two film translation cases below.

Example 2

Original Text: “谁知道你家这儿这么麻烦啊。”

Target Text: Didn't realize your building was Fort Knox.

This line is an exclamation from Xiao Ye after she is stopped by security guards when visiting her date, Dr. Wang, at his apartment for the first time. A straightforward translation would be to add “it's so troublesome to get in” and render the sentence literally. However, to make the translation more vivid and resonate with foreign audiences, the translator used the American place name “Fort Knox”, ordinarily translated into Chinese as “Nuòkèsībǎo” (诺克斯堡), Fort Knox is a U.S. military base in Kentucky. It serves as the home of the U.S. Army Armor Center and the U.S. Army Recruiting Command. Additionally, it is renowned for housing the U.S. Bullion Depository, which stores a vast amount of gold reserves and acts as a key repository for America's national gold stockpile. It goes without saying that its security measures are extremely strict—foreign audiences will instantly grasp this cultural reference and smile in understanding.

Example 3

Original Text: “你也堕落了。”

Target Text: How the mighty have fallen.

This line is spoken by a former subordinate of Tie Mei. Tie Mei, once a prominent investigative journalist in China, was forced to join her former subordinate's We-Media company to host live-streaming sales due to the decline of the print media industry. While the original line contains no complex culture-specific terms and could be translated literally, the translator chose to quote the English proverb “How the mighty have fallen” to enhance

the humor of the dialogue. This proverb originates from 2 Samuel 1:19 in the Old Testament of the Bible. In the story, Saul, the first king of Israel, and his son Jonathan were killed in battle against the Philistines. Upon learning of their deaths, David was overwhelmed with grief and composed an elegy that included the line “how the mighty have fallen”—used to lament the passing of the once-powerful Saul and Jonathan, and express sorrow over Israel’s loss of its heroes^[14]. Later, this phrase evolved into an idiom, used to describe the sudden downfall or decline of a person, enterprise, organization, or even a country that was once powerful, successful, or influential. By referencing this cultural allusion from Anglo-American culture, the translator retained the literal meaning of the original text while successfully conveying the humorous effect of the line to Western audiences.

4.3. The fidelity principle

The so-called “fidelity” means that translation activities should establish a connection and responsibility between the source text and the target text based on a purpose-oriented approach. However, this fidelity is not an absolute duplication of the source text’s linguistic form in the traditional sense, but a dynamic functional correspondence. This principle is not the top priority in literary translation; when it conflicts with the Skopos Theory, translators may appropriately “betray” the source text and make reasonable adjustments in the translation. The following case illustrates the translator’s flexible adoption of the fidelity principle.

Example 4

Source text: “家人们”

Target text: people

Tie Mei addresses the audience in the live stream as “家人们” (jiārénmen), a common practice among live streamers intended to build an intimate relationship with the audience and enhance interaction stickiness. This not only weakens the commercial atmosphere, making the audience feel like they are part of the streamer’s inner circle and reducing the sense of distance in transactions, but also satisfies consumers’ emotional needs and evokes resonance. However, this effect only holds in a specific cultural context.

The concept of “家和万事兴” (jiā hé wàn shì xīng, meaning “harmony in the family leads to prosperity in all undertakings”) is deeply rooted in China. Chinese people value family harmony and stability, and emphasize amicable relationships among family members. Therefore, the cultural association brought by “家人们” is usually positive and warm. In contrast, Western culture is based on individualism, emphasizing personal freedom, rights, and development^[15]. Adult children generally leave their parents to live independently, and parents also encourage their children to achieve financial and ideological independence as early as possible to avoid excessive dependence on the family. Westerners pursue personal happiness and rarely sacrifice their personal feelings to maintain family harmony. Due to this cultural background difference, the address “家人们” may not evoke familiarity and affection among Westerners; instead, it might make them feel alienated or even vigilant. Therefore, the translator adjusted the translation to “people,” a term commonly used by Westerners, similar to the Chinese “大家” (dàjiā).

5. Conclusion

In recent years, as Chinese culture continues to go global and spread further worldwide, excellent domestic films have also gained more and more foreign audiences. The Good Stuff, as one of the highest-rated domestic films of 2024, embodies the creators’ in-depth thinking on women’s issues and has sparked discussions among audiences. By analyzing the subtitle translation strategies of this film, this paper finds that under the guidance of Skopos

Theory, the translator accurately comprehended the original creators' intentions and skillfully applied Western cultural allusions. This effectively tells Chinese stories to the West and promotes the dissemination of excellent contemporary Chinese culture.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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