

A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of English Film Subtitles

Zeyuan Li

Liaoning University of Science and Technology, Anshan, Liaoning, 114051, China

ABSTRACT

Based on the theory of multimodal discourse analysis, this paper explores the characteristics, challenges, and strategies of English film subtitle translation. By analyzing the synergistic effects of visual, auditory, and linguistic modalities, the paper reveals the application value of multimodal discourse analysis in subtitle translation. The study finds that comprehensive consideration of multimodal information can improve the accuracy of subtitle translation and the audience's viewing experience, providing new theoretical perspectives and methodological support for the practice of film subtitle translation.

KEYWORDS

Multimodal discourse analysis; English film subtitles; Translation strategies; Cross-cultural communication a multimodal discourse analysis of English film subtitles

1 Introduction

With the accelerating pace of globalization, English-language films, with their rich cultural connotations and powerful entertainment value, have become a crucial medium for international cultural exchange. English-language films transcend national borders and are widely disseminated around the world, opening a window into other cultures for people from diverse cultural backgrounds. However, for non-native English-speaking audiences, the quality of film subtitle translation directly impacts their understanding and acceptance of the film's content. Well-translated subtitles allow viewers to experience the charm of the film as if they were actually there, deeply understanding the plot and the emotions of the characters; whereas poorly translated subtitles can leave viewers confused and even lead to misunderstandings, seriously impacting their viewing experience. Traditional subtitle translation research has largely focused on linguistic translation, striving to accurately translate vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structures from the source language to the target language. However, this approach overlooks the important role of non-verbal modalities such as vision and hearing in information transmission. In film, a comprehensive art form, non-verbal elements such as images and sounds are closely integrated with the verbal text to form a complete information system. Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) has emerged as an interdisciplinary research method. It emphasizes the synergy between language and non-verbal symbols, breaking the traditional limitation of focusing solely on the linguistic level and providing a new perspective for subtitle translation research. This paper aims to explore the characteristics, challenges, and corresponding strategies of English film subtitle translation using the theory of multimodal discourse analysis, hoping to provide solid theoretical guidance for subtitle translation practice.

2 Overview of Multimodal Discourse Analysis Theory

Multimodal discourse analysis originates from the intersection and integration of linguistics, sociology, communication, and other fields. It aims to comprehensively and deeply analyze the structure and meaning of discourse by integrating multiple modalities, such as language, vision, and hearing. The core concept of MDA is that meaning is not constructed by a single linguistic element, but rather is the result of the interaction of linguistic and non-linguistic symbols. In the specific context of film, multiple modalities, such as language text, visual imagery, and sound effects, intertwine and influence each other, collectively conveying a rich message. In the field of film subtitle translation, MDA not only focuses on the conversion of text itself—that is, how to accurately and fluently translate subtitles from the source language into the target language—but also emphasizes the synergy between subtitles and non-linguistic modalities such as visuals and sound. Only by fully considering the interrelationships between these various modalities can we more comprehensively and accurately understand the process of conveying film information, thereby achieving a perfect fit between subtitle translation and the overall film's expression.

3 Multimodal Characteristics of English Film Subtitle Translation

3.1 Visual Modality

Visual modality is the most intuitive and easily perceived modality in film subtitle translation. It encompasses multiple

aspects, such as characters' facial expressions, body language, and scene layout. In films, characters' facial expressions delicately convey emotions, including joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness. Body language, through movement and gesture, reveals the character's personality traits and inner world. Scene layout provides a specific setting and environment for the story, creating a distinct atmosphere. In the subtitle translation process, translators need to accurately capture this visual information and further convey the character's emotional changes and the scene's atmosphere through the subtitles' presentation, such as font, color, and size. For example, when translating dialogue in a tense scene, the subtitles can use a stronger, more forceful font and a striking red or orange color to highlight the character's tension and visually convey the tense atmosphere. Similarly, when depicting a warm and romantic scene, the subtitles can use a softer, more graceful font and a subtle pink or purple color to create a romantic atmosphere.

3.2 Auditory Modality

Auditory modality involves the various sound elements in the original film, including dialogue, background music, and sound effects. Dialogue is one of the primary ways to convey information in a film, directly showcasing the interactions and exchanges of ideas between characters. Background music creates a specific emotional atmosphere and enhances the audience's sense of immersion. Sound effects, by simulating various sounds, such as wind, rain, and footsteps, make scenes more realistic and vivid. When translating subtitles, translators need to remain faithful to the auditory information of the original soundtrack while fully considering the auditory habits and cultural differences of the target language. For example, when translating music or sound effects with a specific cultural background, due to the differences in understanding and perception of music and sound effects across cultures, translators need to explain them through subtitles or use equivalent expressions to ensure audience understanding and acceptance. For example, if a film featuring traditional Chinese cultural elements includes a guzheng performance, the translator could briefly introduce the characteristics of the guzheng and traditional Chinese musical culture in the subtitles to help the audience better understand the cultural connotations conveyed by this scene.

3.3 Linguistic Modality

Linguistic modality is the core of subtitle translation, involving linguistic knowledge such as vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure. Translators must apply extensive linguistic knowledge and translation skills to ensure that the translation is fluent, accurate, and conforms to the grammatical rules of the target language. Excellent subtitle translation must not only accurately convey the meaning of the original text but also ensure that the translation flows naturally and smoothly in the target language, conforming to the audience's reading habits. Furthermore, translators must pay special attention to the polysemy and cultural connotations of vocabulary. The same word can have different meanings in different contexts and cultural backgrounds. If translators fail to pay attention to this, ambiguity and misunderstanding can easily arise. For example, the word "dragon" in English often symbolizes evil, while in Chinese culture, it symbolizes auspiciousness and authority. Therefore, when translating words related to the dragon, translators need to handle them appropriately based on the specific context and cultural background to avoid misunderstandings caused by cultural differences.

3.4 Cultural Modality

Cultural modality addresses the issue of cultural differences in cross-cultural communication. Because different countries and ethnic groups have their own unique cultural backgrounds, values, and social customs, these cultural differences must be fully considered in film subtitle translation. Translators need to deeply understand the cultural backgrounds of both the source and target languages and accurately grasp the differences between the two cultures to ensure the cultural adaptability and acceptability of the translated text. For example, when translating lines that have a specific cultural context, translators need to perform appropriate cultural conversion. For example, in an American film, a character says "Break a leg." While this literal translation means "break a leg," in American culture, it means wishing someone good luck and is often used before a performance. If the translator translates this literally, Chinese audiences will be confused. Therefore, the translator can translate it as "I wish you good luck," which aligns with Chinese cultural conventions while accurately conveying the original meaning.

4 Case Study: Taking "Coco" as an Example

"Coco" is an animated film imbued with Mexican cultural elements. Its subtitle translation requires full consideration of cultural differences and modal synergy. The following is an example of multimodal discourse analysis of the film's subtitle translation:

4.1 Synergy between Vision and Subtitles

In the film, when the protagonist Miguel stumbles into the world of the dead on the Day of the Dead, the screen is

filled with a multitude of colorful images of the dead and festive decorations. These visual elements create a magical, mysterious, and festive world of the dead. When translating subtitles, translators need to use the subtitle presentation (such as font and color) to echo the visual effects of the film to enhance the audience's immersion. For example, "Day of the Dead" can be translated as "Día de los Muertos" (the original Spanish term, preserving cultural characteristics), and the subtitle font and color design can highlight the festive atmosphere. The subtitle font can choose an artistic font with Mexican characteristics, such as one with floral decorations, to reflect the uniqueness of Mexican culture. The vibrant colors of orange and purple are chosen to echo the colors of the Day of the Dead decorations in the film. Orange represents enthusiasm and vitality, while purple symbolizes mystery and solemnity. The combination of these two colors perfectly creates the lively and mysterious atmosphere of the Day of the Dead. This allows viewers to more directly experience the unique atmosphere of the Day of the Dead, as if transported to that magical world. For example, when depicting the architectural style of the World of the Dead, the film features traditional Mexican-style houses with vibrant colors and unique shapes. In this case, the subtitles describing these buildings can use fonts and colors that complement the visual style. For example, using a lively, vibrant font and bright colors that harmonize with the architectural colors, such as yellow or blue, can help the subtitles blend seamlessly into the image, further enhancing the audience's visual experience.

4.2 Synergy between Auditory and Subtitles

Background music and sound effects in a film play a crucial role in creating atmosphere and conveying emotion. Music permeates the film "Coco," with different musical styles and melodies expressing distinct emotions and atmospheres. When translating dialogue involving music or sound effects, translators must ensure that subtitles align with the auditory information. For example, when Miguel sings "Remember Me" in the world of the dead, the song's melodies are beautiful and emotionally heartfelt, making it one of the film's core songs. The subtitles must accurately convey the mood and emotion of the lyrics while also coordinating with the background music to enhance audience resonance. Translators can create poetic lyrics, such as "Remember me, though I'm going far away; Remember me, when you hear the sad guitar." Such a translation preserves the emotion of the original text while aligning with the melody of the music, allowing viewers to better understand the song's meaning through the subtitles while enjoying the music. For example, during a thrilling chase scene in the film, the background music accelerates in tempo and the sound effects intensify. When presenting character dialogue, subtitles can use a concise, punchy style and display subtitles at a faster speed to match the rhythm of the music and the tense atmosphere. For example, when a character shouts a short, powerful line while running, the subtitles can be displayed in a larger font and at a faster speed to heighten the audience's sense of tension.

4.3 Addressing Cultural Differences

"Coco" incorporates numerous Mexican cultural elements, such as the Day of the Dead and the family memorial hall. These cultural elements are significant to Mexican culture but may be unfamiliar to audiences from other cultures. When translating these culturally specific concepts, translators should employ appropriate translation strategies, such as domestication, foreignization, or interpretive translation, to ensure understanding and acceptance by the target language audience. For example, "family memorial hall" could be translated as "Ofrenda" (the original Spanish word, preserving the cultural specificity), and supplemented with cultural background information through annotations or explanations in the subtitles. A caption could be added to the subtitles: "Ofrenda is an altar built during the Mexican Day of the Dead for deceased loved ones, upon which photos, food, and mementos are placed to express remembrance and respect." This explanation can help viewers better understand the cultural concept of "Ofrenda" and enhance their understanding of film culture. For example, when the film features the traditional Mexican food "Pan de Muerto" (Bread of the Dead), the translator could retain the original Spanish name and briefly explain it in the subtitles: "Pan de Muerto is a bread special to the Mexican Day of the Dead. It is often sprinkled with icing sugar and shaped like a bone, symbolizing the remembrance of deceased loved ones." This explanation allows viewers to understand the cultural significance of this food and enrich their understanding of Mexican culture. Furthermore, the film contains some idioms and expressions that are characteristic of Mexican culture. For example, "¡Que chido!" means "Great!" in Mexican culture. The translator could simply translate it as "Great!" and add a caption explaining that this is a common Mexican expression to help viewers understand the cultural context. For example, when a character says "¡No manches!", it can be translated as "Stop kidding!" and annotated to indicate that this is Mexican slang expressing surprise or disbelief, helping the audience better understand the character's emotions and context.

5 Conclusion

Based on multimodal discourse analysis theory, this paper explores the characteristics, challenges, and strategies of English film subtitle translation. By analyzing the synergy between visual, auditory, and linguistic modalities, it reveals the

value of multimodal discourse analysis in subtitle translation. The study finds that comprehensive consideration of multimodal information can improve subtitle translation accuracy and enhance the audience's viewing experience. In the case study of "Coco," we see that by synergizing visual and subtitle elements, as well as auditory and subtitle elements, and by properly addressing cultural differences, subtitle translation can better align with the film's overall narrative, allowing audiences to better understand and experience the film's appeal. Future research could further expand the application of multimodal discourse analysis in subtitle translation, such as exploring the multimodal characteristics and delivery strategies of subtitle translation in different film genres (e.g., comedy, tragedy, etc.). Different film genres differ in emotional expression and narrative style, requiring different strategies for subtitle translation. For example, subtitle translation for a comedy film can be more humorous and witty to enhance the comedic effect; whereas subtitle translation for a tragedy film requires a greater emphasis on emotional expression, allowing the audience to deeply connect with the character's pain and sorrow. This systematic analysis of the application and effectiveness of multimodal discourse analysis theory in subtitle translation, combined with specific translation practices, will help to identify more effective translation methods and techniques, providing more targeted guidance for subtitle translation practice. For example, we can study the timeline adjustment strategies for subtitle translation in different types of movies, and how to reasonably arrange the display time of subtitles according to the rhythm of the picture and audio to improve the audience's viewing fluency. Expanding the application field of multimodal discourse analysis theory is not limited to movie subtitle translation, but can also be applied to other types of text translation and cross-cultural communication scenarios. For example, in the fields of game translation and advertising translation, it is also necessary to consider the synergy of multiple modalities to achieve better translation results. By continuously expanding the scope of application of multimodal discourse analysis theory, we can promote the development of translation disciplines and promote communication and integration between different cultures. For example, in game translation, in addition to language translation, it is also necessary to consider multiple modal factors such as game graphics and sound effects to ensure that the translated game can bring similar experiences to players in different cultural backgrounds.

About the Author

Zeyuan Li, Education: Bachelor's, Research Area: English.

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