

Subtitle Translation and External Cultural Communication in the Perspective of Eco-translatology: A Case Study of the Documentary *CGTN Nature*

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ABSTRACT

CGTN Nature, a mini-documentary series on nature, created by China Global Television Network, which realistically documents the topography and landform, climate features, and rare wildlife in China. The documentary is bilingual with English and Chinese subtitles, facilitating Chinese natural landscapes and culture to go global.

This paper applies Professor Hu Gengshen's Eco-translatology to analyze the subtitle translation in CGTN Nature. Through case analysis, the article finds that the translator firstly adapt to the specific "ecological context" of the film, and then choose the most appropriate language to translate the subtitles from the three dimensional transformations of language, culture and communication. Due to the inherent "constraints" of subtitles, the three-dimensional transformations can break this constraint and achieve better translation results to some extent. This paper finally concludes that translators should give full play to their subjectivity and make "adaptive choices" on the basis of balancing the constraints of documentary translation, so that they can translate high-quality subtitles and thus realize the documentaries' purpose of overseas publicity and cultural communication. The author hopes that this article can provide some reference for the theory and practice of English subtitle translation, and calls for more translators to devote themselves to the translation of Chinese foreign publicity work.

KEYWORDS

Eco-translatology; Three dimensional transformations; Subtitle translation; CGTN Nature

DOI: 10.47297/wspiedWSP2516-250028.20230702

1 Introduction

The resolution on the significant achievements and historical experiences of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in its centennial struggle, passed during the Sixth Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee, emphasizes the need to "accelerate the construction of international communication capabilities and tell China's story and the story of the CPC well to the world, spreading the voice of China." It can be said that excelling in "international translation" and foreign cultural communication is a top priority in the current national agenda. At this juncture, the documentary series CGTN Nature with bilingual Chinese-English subtitles has emerged, aiming to present China's pristine natural ecology to the international community and disseminate Chinese culture effectively. The translation of its subtitles undoubtedly shoulders the heavy responsibility of external cultural

communication and “telling well the Chinese story”.

CGTN Nature covers the diverse landscapes across China, showcasing the country's natural ecology and biodiversity comprehensively. To enable international audiences to deeply understand the cultural connotations in the documentary and accurately convey the intended meanings of the source language, subtitle translation plays an irreplaceable role. In the process of international dissemination of Chinese culture, the bridge role of translation is paramount and cannot be overlooked.^[1] This paper applies Hu Gengshen's eco-translatology, analyzing the features of subtitle translation and exploring how subtitle translators adapt to specific audiovisual translation ecological environments. It delves into translation adaptation and selection from the perspectives of “adaptation” and “choice” in the three dimensions of language, culture, and communication, helping target audiences overcome language barriers and maximize the acquisition of source language information.

This paper discusses the relationship between foreign translation, eco-translatology, and the dissemination of foreign cultures. It applies eco-translatology to analyze the subtitle translation of CGTN Nature. The aim of this paper is to provide relevant insights for translation learners and, on the other hand, to promote the international dissemination of outstanding Chinese culture.

2 International Cultural Communication and the Three-Dimensional Transformation in Ecological Translation Studies

International cultural communication inevitably involves the transformation of discourse, and this transformation is closely related to foreign translation. Thus, in terms of their relationship, international cultural communication and foreign translation are two inseparable and interconnected processes in the development and succession of human culture. They directly relate to the mutual adaptation between civilizations and the exchange of culture. Therefore, it is crucial to strengthen the coordination between foreign dissemination and foreign translation. When disseminating Chinese culture through various channels, particular attention should be paid to the significant role of Chinese-English translation and the translation strategies adopted. Correct foreign translation strategies contribute to successful international cultural communication.^[1]

As an important translation strategy in recent years, ecological translation studies play a vital guiding role in the translation of cross-cultural texts, forming a critical link in foreign cultural communication. In the process of international translation, translators need to focus on language differences, communication intentions, and the conveyance of cultural connotations based on the three dimensions of ecological translation studies. In the process of foreign cultural communication, the emphasis on “international” underscores the translation itself. During translation, attention is required not only on the transformation of “culture” but also on the effectiveness of “communication,” thereby achieving high-quality international cultural communication, spreading the voice of China, and telling the Chinese story well.

From the perspective of ecological translation studies, to excel in foreign translation and achieve more effective international cultural communication, translators need to fully leverage subjectivity in the following three aspects:

(1) Focusing on language differences

Focusing on language differences corresponds to the linguistic dimension in ecological translation studies and serves as the foundation for successful foreign translation. In any foreign cultural

communication project, the differences between the source language and the target language must be the initial focus. Taking the subtitle translation of CGTN Nature as an example, translators can only achieve efficient international cultural communication by fully understanding the differences in form, content, statics, and dynamics between Chinese and English languages and tailoring the translation accordingly.

(2) Emphasizing communication intentions

Emphasizing communication intentions corresponds to the communicative dimension in ecological translation studies and is the fundamental approach to successful foreign translation. In foreign cultural communication, the “power of language” is paramount. Therefore, clear communication intentions are required to convey language that the target audience can understand. In CGTN Nature, many four-character idioms with distinctive Chinese cultural features are present. When translating these characteristic phrases, the translator needs to focus on communication intentions, taking into account the acceptability of the translation by the target audience, and disseminating distinctive Chinese culture through translation.

(3) Conveying cultural connotations

Conveying cultural connotations corresponds to the cultural dimension in ecological translation studies and is the fundamental goal of foreign translation, as well as an indispensable path to achieving international cultural communication. In conveying cultural connotations, the translator’s subjectivity comes into play, requiring them to choose translation methods such as literal translation, transliteration, and free translation based on the desired effect of conveying cultural connotations. By conveying cultural connotations through translation, the enthusiasm and interest of foreign audiences in Chinese culture can be stimulated. This not only contributes to China’s international cultural communication but also enhances China’s cultural soft power.^[2]

3 Case Analysis

This section will focus on the three-dimensional transformation of ecological translation studies—namely, the linguistic dimension, cultural dimension, and communicative dimension—by conducting a case analysis of selected subtitles from CGTN Nature. Specifically, the linguistic dimension emphasizes the expression of textual language; the cultural dimension focuses on the contextual effects of translation; and the communicative dimension prioritizes interpersonal communication. CGTN Nature is an ecological documentary featuring rich natural landscapes, and its English-subtitled version serves as a means to effectively communicate China’s outstanding culture and ecological concepts to the international audience. Considering the differences between Chinese and English, translators must exercise subjectivity in translating subtitles, adapting to language differences, and choosing appropriate translation styles to achieve the desired effect of international cultural communication.^[3]

(1) Linguistic dimension

In the linguistic dimension, adaptive transformation refers to “the translator’s adaptive transformation of language forms in the translation process, which occurs in different aspects and levels”^[4]. There are linguistic differences between Chinese and English. In terms of sentence structure, Chinese is a language that emphasizes “meaning-oriented composition,” while English places

emphasis on “form-oriented composition.” Chinese uses meaning to control form, whereas English uses form to convey meaning. From a linguistic perspective, Chinese favors dynamism and frequently employs verbs, while English prefers static expressions and often uses nouns. Therefore, grasping the quality of foreign translation in terms of the linguistic dimension is crucial.

Table.1

例句 1: 睡醒了开吃, 吃累了就睡	译文: They are <u>either</u> chewing <u>or</u> sleeping.
例句 2: 清晨, 当天边开始微微泛红, 树林里开始躁动起来	译文: At dawn, <u>before</u> the sun peeps above the horizon, the woodland begins to stir with life.

Table.2

例 3: 在长白山主峰周围的熔岩台地上, 还 <u>散落着</u> 一百多座小火山	The lava plateau around the main peak <u>is home to</u> over 100 small volcanoes.
例 4: <u>守望</u> 高山	<u>Watchmen</u> of the Mountains

Chinese is a language primarily focused on conveying meaning, and its sentence structures often lack logical reasoning, allowing for a more authentic reflection of dialectical relationships in real-life situations, using a scattered sentence structure. For instance, in the examples 1 and 2 from Table 1, “睡醒了开吃, 吃累了就睡” and “清晨, 当天边开始微微泛红, 树林里开始躁动起来”. In contrast, English primarily emphasizes form, explicit connections, sentence forms, and structural integrity, using a focal point sentence structure. Therefore, to express sentence logic clearly, the translation of example 1 adds “either...or” to connect “吃” and “睡”; example 2 adds the time logical connector “before” to present a clear timeline. In doing so, the translation conforms to the characteristics of the English language, clearly expressing the logical relationships present in the original text.^[5]

From a linguistic perspective, English tends to be a static language, relying heavily on nouns, while Chinese tends to be a dynamic language, using more verbs. The characteristics of the two languages differ, and translators should be mindful of and adjust for these differences, providing translators with more creative space (Shi Hailan, 2020). As illustrated in example 3 from Table 2, “在长白山主峰周围的熔岩台地上, 还散落着一百多座小火山”, the Chinese expression uses the verb “散落着”, and the translator, considering the differences in dynamic and static elements between Chinese and English, translates it into the noun-focused “is home to.” In example 4, the subtitle “守望高山” from “CGTN Nature” is evidently dynamic. The translator handles it by presenting it in a static form as “Watchmen of the Mountains,” using the noun “watchmen” to replace the verb “守望”.

(2) Communicative dimension

The adaptive selection and transformation in the communicative dimension refers to the translator's focus on adaptively selecting and transforming bilingual communicative intentions during the translation process. The communicative dimension not only requires translators to convert language information and convey cultural connotations but also emphasizes the importance of choosing transformations at the communicative level. This ensures that the communicative intent of the original text is realized in the translation. The communicative dimension in ecological translation studies focuses on communicative intent, which is the primary consideration for achieving high-quality international cultural communication. Whether the cultural connotations expressed in the source language can be fully accepted by the target language readers depends on its communicative effectiveness.

Table.3

例 5: 母凭子贵	译文: A mother's status in the group depends on her child.
例 6: 乍暖还寒	译文: It is still chilly during springtime.
例 7: 草根阶层	译文: Monkeys at the bottom of the society

The author believes that as a cultural communication medium, documentaries play a crucial role in promoting the cultural connotations depicted in the film, thus achieving the goal of cultural communication. In the translation of the narration in the documentary CGTN Nature, due consideration has been given to the cultural communicative function of the English version, providing the audience with a clear understanding of its cultural content. The author has selected three examples that represent the communicative dimension from the translation of the documentary subtitles.

In Chinese, four-character idioms are commonly used to express cultural connotations, which often conceal deep layers of meaning. In example 5, “母凭子贵”, the character “贵” does not literally mean “expensive” but refers to “status.” Example 6, “乍暖还寒”, describes early spring weather in Chinese, so the translator adds the element of “spring” to convey the appropriate cultural context. In example 7, “草根阶层”, a direct translation may be unclear and fail to achieve communicative goals. Based on the context of this phrase, it can be translated as “社会底层的猴子”. Therefore, when translating four-character idioms, translators need to carefully analyze the context of the translation, avoiding literal translations to achieve effective cultural communication in the process of international translation.

(3) Cultural dimension

The “adaptive selection and transformation in the cultural dimension” refers to the translator’s focus on conveying and interpreting bilingual cultural connotations during the translation process. “CGTN Nature” is a documentary introducing the beautiful natural environment of China, and its Chinese subtitles contain rich four-character idioms, which are products of the long-term development of Chinese social culture.^[6] When translating these four-character idioms, the translator needs to adapt to the requirements of cross-cultural and cultural communication to achieve a high-quality effect in international cultural communication.

The adaptive selection and transformation in the cultural dimension involve paying attention to the differences in nature and content between the source language culture and the target language culture, avoiding misinterpretation of the original text from the perspective of the target language culture. While performing the conversion of the source language, the translator focuses on adapting to the entire cultural system to which the language belongs.

Table.3

例 7: 它也是满族的发祥地	译文: It is also regarded as the birthplace of the manchu people
例 8: 长白山的名字由此而来	译文: Hence the name Changbai, or perpetually white.
例 9: 所以人们也叫它“六不像”	译文: Therefore, it has been called “Six Dissimilarities.”

Starting from the adaptive selection and transformation in the cultural dimension, in example 7, when translating “满族”, the translator adopts the strategy of foreignization through transliteration, translating it as “Manchu.” This translation closely approximates the source language and gives the text a distinctive exotic flavor. While promoting ethnic culture, it can also spark the audience’s curiosity about Manchu culture.^[7] In example 8, the translator translates “长白山的名字由此而来” by directly transliterating “Changbai” and adding its English meaning “perpetually white.” This approach helps foreign audiences gain a better understanding of China’s human geography, encounter the simple Chinese civilization, and attract foreign audiences’ interest in Chinese culture. In example 9, “所以人们也叫它六不像” (“So people also call it ‘Six Dissimilarities’”), the term “六不像” in Chinese refers to the serow, and the translator chooses to translate it directly as “Six Dissimilarities,” promoting the dissemination of Chinese culture to a certain extent. According to Franco (2000), the use of “foreign words” to some extent in documentary subtitle translation can be welcomed by the export audience due to the analysis of the characteristics of documentaries and their features and genres in the culture

they belong to.

4 Conclusion

Building on the foundation laid by predecessors, this paper innovatively elucidates the inherent connections among national international cultural communication, international translation, and ecological translation studies. Specifically, ecological translation studies serve as a crucial theoretical underpinning for international translation, which, in turn, constitutes an essential avenue for international cultural communication. Therefore, the effective execution of international cultural communication is inseparable from the guidance provided by ecological translation studies.

Using “CGTN Nature” as a case study, this paper thoroughly analyzes the role of ecological translation studies’ “three-dimensional transformation” in subtitle translation and international cultural communication. It offers valuable insights and references for students of translation studies. In response to the national call for enhanced international communication capabilities and the imperative to narrate compelling stories about China and the Communist Party to the world, every translator should solidify their translation skills. By doing so, they can contribute continuously to the country’s international cultural communication efforts, broadcasting China’s voice and narratives globally.

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