

A Brief Analysis of the Translation of English Subtitles of *Coco* from Linguistic Adaptation Theory

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Abstract

In an era marked by global cultural exchange, the translation of film subtitles assumes a critical role in bridging linguistic and cultural divides. This paper presents an in-depth analysis of the English subtitle translation of the animated film "*Coco*," a narrative rich with cultural symbolism. Utilizing Jef Verschueren's Linguistic Adaptation Theory as a theoretical framework, the study navigates the complexities of lexical, syntactic, cultural, and contextual adaptations within the subtitle translation process. The paper underscores the importance of subtitle translation in making films accessible and enjoyable for global audiences. Lexical and syntactic adaptations are discussed, with examples drawn from the film's subtitles to illustrate the translator's efforts to render the dialogues culturally resonant and contextually appropriate. Based on Adaptation Theory, after the discussion and analysis of the subtitle translation of *Coco*, the author has offered some detailed explanation on the subtitle translation from several angles of Adaptation Theory, hoping that it will provide some reference for other people as well.

Keywords

The Adaptation Theory, Subtitle Translation, *Coco*.

1. Introduction

The globalization of media has necessitated the translation of films to reach diverse audiences. Subtitle translation, a critical component of this process, must overcome linguistic and cultural barriers to convey the original message effectively. Subtitle Translation is different from other forms of translation. Subtitled translation is the only form of translation in which the source text and the translated text appear simultaneously, and is therefore subject to the norms of the linguistic text as well as to the inevitable norms of form, such as space and time. Excellent subtitle translation must also pursue the invisibility of subtitles to achieve the perfect unity of sound, picture and visual effects of movie and television dramas [1]. This paper focuses on the English subtitle translation of the animated film *Coco*, which is rich in cultural nuances. The primary research questions addressed are: How does linguistic adaptation theory apply to subtitle translation, and what strategies are employed to ensure cultural and contextual fidelity? Previous studies on *Coco* have primarily examined cultural comparisons, narrative techniques, and educational impacts. Few have delved into subtitle translation, despite its importance for global audience reception. The literature on adaptation theory, introduced by Jef Verschueren, provides a theoretical framework for understanding language as a tool for communication that must adapt to various contexts. This paper aims to explore the application of linguistic adaptation theory to the subtitle translation of *Coco*, examining lexical, syntactic, cultural, and contextual adaptations. The research methodology involves a qualitative analysis of the subtitles, comparing the original and translated texts. The significance of this study lies in enhancing subtitle translation practices in China and contributing to the broader understanding of cross-cultural communication in film.

The current study is structured into an introduction, body, and conclusion. The body is divided into three main sections: language adaptation, cultural adaptation, and context adaptation, each addressing a facet of subtitle translation. By adhering to the structure outlined, this paper provides a comprehensive analysis of subtitle translation in *Coco*, contributing valuable insights into the field of cross-cultural communication and film translation.

2. Overview of the Adaptation Theory

2.1. The Adaptation Theory

The use of language is the process of making choices. The Adaptation Theory was first introduced by Jef Verschueren, who considered the use of language as a process of choosing language—a process of adapting different occasions and different human beings to make negotiable linguistic choices from a variable range of possibilities in such a way as to approach points of satisfaction for communicative needs [2].

In regards to making choices, there are seven features: First, choices are indeed made at every possible level of structure, and choice-making at different levels is simultaneous; second, speakers do not only choose forms, and they also choose strategies on a wide range of structural levels, such as language, style, terms of address, lexicon in general, and so on; third, the term “making choices” may invariably suggest a conscious act; fourth, choices are made both in producing and in interpreting an utterance; fifth, a language user has no freedom of choice between choosing and not choosing, except at the level where he or she can decide either to use language or to remain silent; sixth, choices are not equivalent; seventh, choices evoke or carry along their alternatives [2]. In other words, the process of language use represents that the speaker continually makes choices in order that it can meet general communicative requirements. The foundational characterization of linguistic utilization is inherently linked to the concepts of variability, negotiability, and adaptability. It is essential to recognize that adaptability, in essence, is devoid of meaning if it is not underpinned by both variability and negotiability.

2.2. The Use of the Adaptation Theory in the Subtitle Translation

Translation stands as a pivotal activity within the realm of cross-cultural communication, fundamentally characterized by the process of adaptation. To achieve effective communication, a translator must possess a proficient grasp of two languages, enabling them to navigate and adjust a multitude of factors essential to the translation process. These include lexical and syntactic adjustments, as well as cultural and contextual adaptations, which are crucial for conveying the source material's meaning and nuances in the target language. Subtitles are defined as the textual components that are added to film and television works post-production, serving to translate dialogue that typically appears at the base of the visual frame. Shuttleworth and Cowie define subtitle translation as the process of synchronized instructions for film and television drama dialogue [3]. Translators are tasked with the critical role of ensuring that the target audience's viewing experience is as immersive and authentic as that of the original film viewers. This necessitates a concerted effort to adapt the subtitles to reflect the cultural background and linguistic nuances of the target audience. Effective subtitle translation is not merely a facilitator of global recognition for a film; it is a fundamental component of its international success. The global appeal and acclaim of a cinematic work are inextricably linked to the quality and cultural relevance of its subtitle translations.

On June 10, 2025, a search conducted on the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database using the keywords “adaptation theory” and “subtitle translation” yielded a total of 67 pertinent academic papers. On examination of the statistics, it becomes evident that a multitude of scholars have meticulously explored the relationship between the original text and its

translated counterparts through the lens of Adaptation Theory. This exploration encompasses four distinct yet interconnected dimensions: the contextual correlates that influence adaptability, the structural elements subject to adaptation, the dynamic processes inherent in adaptability, and the prominence of adaptability within translation practices.

3. The Application of Adaptation Theory in the Subtitle Translation of *Coco*

Given the significant differences in cultural backgrounds and linguistic conventions, subtitle translators are required to exhibit a high degree of flexibility in adapting to the preferences and expectations of their target audience. A thorough analysis of the subtitle translation for the film *Coco* reveals that the translator, identified as Lu, has diligently endeavored to accommodate these variations. This includes not only linguistic adjustments but also cultural and contextual adaptations that are sensitive to the content and narrative of the film.

3.1. The Adaptation of Language

Language possesses unique characteristics that define its structure and usage, varying significantly across different linguistic systems. A well-established distinction between Chinese and English is their syntactic organization: Chinese is characterized by parataxis, favoring simple and coordinate clauses, whereas English is marked by hypotaxis, which involves complex and subordinate structures. In the context of subtitle translation for *Coco*, language adaptation is primarily evident at two critical levels: the lexical and the syntactic. Lexical adaptation involves the careful selection and rendering of words to ensure cultural and contextual relevance, while syntactic adaptation addresses the structural reorganization of sentences to align with the grammatical norms of the target language.

3.1.1. Adaptation at Lexical Level

In the realm of subtitle translation, lexical adaptation is essential for ensuring authenticity and fostering an immersive experience for the target audience. Lexical conformity refers to the subtitle adjustment due to the word gap in the translation process caused by the inequality between English and Chinese at the lexical level [4]. The film *Coco* exemplifies this through its strategic lexical adaptations. China's linguistic landscape is rich with idioms, proverbs, and colloquial expressions that are deeply ingrained in various contexts, ranging from casual conversations to formal discourse. Consequently, when translating into Chinese, it is imperative for translators to skillfully integrate these idiomatic expressions to enliven the target text. The pervasive use of such idiomatic language in *Coco*'s subtitle translation not only reflects the source material's cultural depth but also resonates with the linguistic preferences of the Chinese audience, thereby enhancing the overall translation's appeal and comprehension.

Example 1. Aw, you're a twig. Have some more. 瞧，你瘦得跟猴似的。多吃点。

The word "twig" refers to a small branch that grows out of a large branch on a bush or tree. The term metaphorically conveys the thinness of the character, akin to a small branch sprouting from a larger one. In Chinese, descriptors such as "竹竿" (bamboo pole) or "猴子" (monkey) are commonly employed to depict a slender physique. The original metaphor is a vehicle for expressing the grandmother's affection and concern for her grandson Miguel's well-being, reflecting a cultural norm where elders often wish to see their children with a fuller figure.

The translation opts for "猴子" to resonate more directly with the audience's understanding. However, a more literal translation that captures the essence of "twig" while aligning with Chinese oral expression could be "瞧，你瘦得跟个竹竿一样。多吃点。"

Example 2. I know your tricks. 我知道你打的什么主意。

“Trick” means that something that somebody does to make other people believe something which is not true, or to annoy people as a joke. It encompasses a range of deceptive or cunning actions intended to mislead or jest with others. In the context of *Coco*, this line is spoken by Miguel’s grandmother, a figure of authority, to a musician who is attempting to persuade Miguel to engage in music against her wishes. Her tone is stern, verging on threatening, conveying a strong disapproval.

The translator has adeptly captured the essence of this sentiment in the Chinese translation. However, to delve deeper into the cultural and emotional resonance, one could argue for the use of the more culturally specific and idiomatic expression “玩把戏” to replace “tricks.” The phrase “玩把戏” directly translates to “playing tricks” or “pulling stunts,” which not only aligns more closely with the original English connotation but also carries the weight of deceit and cunning commonly associated with “trick” in Chinese idiomatic language.

The translation encapsulates the speaker’s discontent and aversion more vividly. This choice of words provides a richer emotional context and ensures that the translated line carries the same weight and implications as in the original dialogue, thus preserving the integrity of the character’s stance and the narrative’s flow within the target cultural framework.

3.1.2. Adaptation at Syntactic Level

Chinese is characterized as a semantic-oriented language, prioritizing the significance of characters and their interrelations, with a particular emphasis on the content’s meaning. Chinese syntax is concerned with the collection of text to become quality, with meaning as the main focus [5]. This semantic focus often results in constructions where the subject is implied or even absent, diverging from the explicit subject-predicate structure commonly expected in English. In contrast, nine out of ten English sentences are paired by subject-verb-object [6]. English operates within a grammatical framework that mandates a clear subject-predicate sequence, with sentence structure governed by formal logic and the syntactic roles of various parts of speech. This distinction between the two languages underscores the need for careful adaptation in translation, ensuring that the semantic richness of the source language is effectively conveyed within the grammatical constraints of the target language.

Example 3. No one’s going anywhere. 都在家好好呆着。

The translation exemplifies the adaptation to Chinese linguistic preferences. In Chinese communication, affirmative expressions are often preferred over negative constructions, hence the translated version avoids the direct negation and instead offers an instructive affirmation. This approach aligns with the cultural tendency to convey directives in a positive light, which is particularly true when the speaker assumes an authoritative or elder role. The translated sentence effectively captures the admonishing tone of the speaker, suggesting a protective and commanding presence.

Moreover, the omission of the subject “你们” (you all) in the Chinese translation adheres to the common linguistic practice in Chinese, where the subject is frequently implied and therefore may be omitted for the sake of brevity and clarity. This adaptation not only streamlines the sentence but also ensures that it resonates with the target audience’s conversational norms, thereby enhancing the overall naturalness and impact of the translation.

Example 4. Family comes first. 家人永远最重要。

In the film’s denouement, the protagonist Miguel, who has been on a journey to fulfill his musical aspirations in spite of his family’s objections, utters the pivotal phrase “Family comes first.” Originally perceiving his family’s stance as an impediment to his dreams, Miguel experiences a profound transformation, realizing the paramount importance of familial bonds. The translator’s choice to append “永远”(forever) to the phrase “家人最重要” (family is the

most important) serves to underscore the depth of this epiphany, highlighting a complete shift in Miguel's values.

This enhancement not only emphasizes the enduring significance of family in Miguel's newfound perspective but also streamlines the expression when juxtaposed with a more literal translation such as “把家人放在第一位”(put family first). The conciseness of “家人永远最重要” allows for a more poignant and memorable delivery of this critical revelation, encapsulating the film's core message in a way that resonates deeply with audiences across cultural boundaries.

3.2. The Adaptation of Culture

Translation, as interlingual communication, is not only a process of language conversion, but also a process of cultural transplantation [7]. In a paper read in 1818, the German philosopher Schleier Macher proposed two strategies, domestication and foreignization, which are commonly used by translators to deal with cultural factors in translation. Lawrence Venuti argues that foreignization is to leave the author alone and bring the reader closer to the author, whereas domestication is to break the norms of the imported language and keep the source language components and get the author closer to the reader [8]. Subtitle translation has many constraints due to the mode of discourse, i.e. the characteristics of the medium itself. On the other hand, the multimedia nature of film and television also provides many favorable conditions for intercultural communication [9].

3.2.1. Domesticating Translation

Domesticating translation aims to capitalize on the strengths of the target language, bringing the translated text closer to the audience and minimizing cultural disparities. This approach strives to facilitate a reciprocal understanding between the source and target cultures by making the translated work relatable and accessible to the readers. Given the inherent cultural variations among languages, it demands a high degree of cultural acuity from translators. They must possess the ability to thoroughly and precisely interpret the national psyche and cognitive patterns of the source language's culture, ensuring that the rich cultural connotations embedded in the original text are effectively conveyed and appreciated in the translated version. This process requires a delicate balance, as translators endeavor to maintain the integrity of the original work while making it culturally resonant and intelligible to the target audience [10].

Example 5. That devil box tells you nothing but lies. 这个愚蠢的破盒子就是在撒谎。

In English-speaking contexts, the term “devil” commonly evokes the image of a malevolent supernatural being. However, in the Chinese translation, the translator has opted to convey the meaning as “this foolish, broken box is lying,” effectively substituting the connotation of evil with that of foolishness.

This shift in meaning is a deliberate strategy to overcome the cultural gap that might exist for the Chinese audience, who may not readily associate the concept of a “devil” with deception. By rendering “devil” as “愚蠢的” (foolish), the translator ensures that the intended message of the box's deceitfulness is still conveyed, but in a manner that is more culturally accessible and intelligible to the target audience. This adaptation illustrates the translator's sensitivity to cultural nuances and their ability to navigate the complexities of meaning transfer between disparate cultural frameworks.

Example 6. Be reasonable. 要乖哦。

This example serves as a quintessential example of the cultural nuances that must be navigated in translation. In English-speaking societies, the expectation for individuals, particularly the younger generation, is to exhibit rationality and sound judgment. Conversely, in Chinese culture, there is a deeply ingrained value placed on filial piety and obedience, particularly towards elders. The translated phrase “要乖哦”(be obedient, or literally, be good), captures the essence

of this cultural divergence. It reflects the Chinese elders' preference for obedience as a manifestation of respect and filial duty. The translation subtly suggests that while English parents may prioritize the development of rationality and maturity in their children to foster understanding and communication, Chinese parents often prioritize obedience as a fundamental virtue.

Moreover, the use of “要乖哦” not only aligns with the cultural expectation of obedience but also carries an implicit tone of admonition, which may be less overt in the original “Be reasonable.” This choice of translation demonstrates the translator's adeptness in balancing the semantic content with the cultural context, ensuring that the message resonates with the target audience while maintaining the subtlety and depth of the original utterance.

3.2.2. Foreignizing Translation

Foreignization in translation refers to the strategy of intentionally introducing the target readership to the cultural and linguistic disparities inherent in the source text. This approach, underpinned by a commitment to preserving the original cultural essence, positions the readers within the context of the translated language, thereby inviting them to engage with and appreciate the distinct cultural nuances. By doing so, foreignization encourages a comparative cultural discourse, prompting readers to reflect upon and reassess their own cultural frameworks in relation to those of the source material.

Xiong Bing holds that this strategy means preserving the literary and cultural qualities of the source language as much as possible and retaining the exotic flavor in the translation [11]. This method of translation demands that the translator immerse themselves in the source language's cultural milieu, adopting the authentic expressions and styles that the original author employs. The goal is to approximate the original character's voice and to convey the source language with fidelity and authenticity. Foreignization, or dissemination, thus serves as a bridge, facilitating a deeper understanding and appreciation of the source culture while also enriching the target culture's literary landscape.

Example 7. Oh, the mighty Xolodog! 哦！好可爱的无毛犬！

The exclamation is a prime illustration of the challenges and opportunities inherent in foreignizing translation. The Xolodog, a breed of Mexican hairless dog, holds a distinctive cultural position in Mexico, embodying a paradoxical blend of perceived ugliness and charm, and is often depicted as a guide in the spiritual realm of the underworld.

In the translation, the term “Xolodog” is retained, reflecting a decision to preserve the original cultural reference. While this choice may initially perplex the audience, who might not be familiar with the breed's significance, it also presents an opportunity for cultural discovery. The retention of the original term invites the audience to explore and learn more about the unique cultural elements that the Xolodog represents.

Example 8. The alebrijes of this world can take many forms. They are as mysterious as they are powerful. 死亡世界爱波瑞吉可是形状各异的。他们既神秘又伟大。

The line introduces a cultural element that is distinctly foreign to a Chinese audience. Alebrijes, mythical Mexican creatures known for their vibrant colors and the role as guides for wandering spirits, do not have a direct equivalent in Chinese culture. Consequently, the translator opted for a transliteration, rendering the term as “爱波瑞吉”, a decision that acknowledges the absence of a corresponding concept.

This transliteration serves as an entry point for the audience to engage with an unfamiliar cultural symbol. As the film progresses, viewers are gradually immersed in the narrative and symbolism of the alebrijes, understanding their significance and role within the story. This approach allows the audience to discover and appreciate the cultural richness of the source material without prior knowledge of the concept.

3.3. The Adaptation of Context

The translator's understanding of the original text determines the translator's cultural orientation, and only by thoroughly comprehending the meaning of the original language can the linguistic meaning of the original language be accurately conveyed to the target audience. In the process of translation comprehension, the translator acts as the information receiver of the original language, and the translator must understand the original language correctly from the context and social and cultural environment in which the original language is located, i.e., the original language's intra-linguistic context, situational context and cultural context, and accurately reproduce the original text's context [12].

Example 9. You'll feel better after you eat with your family. 一家人吃个饭就什么都过去了。

As comforted by Miguel's grandmother amidst the turmoil following the destruction of his guitar, encapsulates a profound cultural value placed on familial bonds. The grandmother's words reflect a deeply ingrained belief that the family unit is the cornerstone of support and solace, where even the simplest of gatherings, such as sharing a meal, can offer profound comfort and ameliorate distress.

In the given context, the grandmother's use of traditional wisdom to console her grandson is characteristic of the intergenerational dynamics often found in family-oriented cultures. The translated phrase captures the essence of this cultural norm with brevity and resonance. It conveys the idea that familial unity and the act of commensality possess a restorative power that transcends individual troubles.

The choice of words in the translation is not only succinct but also aligns with the speaker's identity and the tone of voice expected from an elder. The literal translation “和家人一起吃过饭后你会感觉好些” (After eating with your family, you will feel better), while accurate, lacks the cultural depth and the emotive impact of the original rendering. The translated version thus serves to authentically represent the speaker's intent and the cultural context within which the conversation takes place, providing viewers with a more nuanced understanding of the narrative and its underlying cultural significance.

Example 10. Ah, it's too popular. 太俗了。

The assessment succinctly captures a pivotal moment in the narrative, where “it” refers to the song “Remember Me.” The song's widespread acclaim has led to its widespread performance, creating a scenario where choosing to play “Remember Me” could potentially render Miguel's performance mundane in the context of a competition. The translator's choice to render this as “太俗了” (too common or overly familiar), conveys the notion that performing such a well-known piece might lack the element of surprise or originality necessary to stand out.

This translation not only captures the sentiment that the song has become cliché but also aligns with the character's strategic considerations in the competition. The translator's contextual adaptation ensures that the dialogue is seamlessly integrated into the film's narrative, maintaining coherence and enhancing the vividness of the storytelling.

The importance of contextual adaptation in subtitle translation cannot be overstated. It ensures that the translated lines feel natural to the audience, avoiding any sense of awkwardness or disconnect from the flow of the film. By paying close attention to the characters' personalities and the progression of the plot, the translator effectively immerses the audience in the story, allowing them to experience the emotional and dramatic nuances as intended.

4. Conclusion

The translation of animated films, a genre renowned for its blend of logic and entertainment, hinges on the preservation of two fundamental elements: narrative coherence and audience engagement. Beyond these, translators are tasked with the additional challenge of adapting not

only the linguistic and cultural nuances but also the contextual fabric of the film to resonate with the target audience.

This paper has provided a concise analysis of the subtitle translation for the animated film *Coco* through the lens of adaptation theory, as articulated by Jef Verschueren in the 1990s. The examination was conducted along three dimensions: linguistic adaptation, encompassing lexical and syntactic analyses alongside translation strategies; cultural adaptation, which was bifurcated into domesticating and foreignizing approaches; and contextual adaptation, crucial for maintaining the narrative's integrity and coherence.

In an era defined by globalization, the imperative for China to cultivate a robust socialist culture is more pressing than ever. Seizing the moment is vital for propelling the nation towards the envisioned rejuvenation. Bolstering the nation's cultural soft power is integral to this grand resurgence, with translation serving as a dual conduit for cultural exchange—absorbing the excellence of foreign cultures and promoting the splendor of China's own cultural heritage on the global stage.

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