Domestication? Over-Domestication?: Feasibility of Applying Chinese Internet Buzzwords in Subtitle Translation

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Abstract. In recent years, more and more Chinese internet buzzwords took their shapes in the subtitle translation of English comedy movies, which has sparked heated discussion on their appropriateness and necessity. This paper is thus designed to argue the feasibility of applying localized Chinese internet buzzwords from the perspective of domestication. By analyzing their occurrence in the official translation of some English comedy movies, the author summarizes the problems of those over-domesticated translations with internet buzzwords and comes up with suggestions to improve the subtitle translation. It is expected that this study can offer a new perspective on the application of internet buzzwords in subtitle translation foregrounded in the context of localization.

Introduction

With more and more English movies entering into Chinese market, subtitle translation of English movies has become a new trend of translation studies. The application of internet buzzwords in subtitle translation has been a controversial issue since its appearance. At the outset, the merits of using online buzzwords, including conciseness, expressiveness, and entertainment have been widely recognized by the public. Many theories have been adopted to analyze the existence of Chinese Internet buzzwords from the theory of skopos (Zhang, 2011; Zhao, 2013), translation ethics (Wen, 2013), relevance (Wei, 2014), text analysis (Wang, 2014) and rewriting (Lv & Li, 2013; Cui, 2016) with different cases.

While after the release of Madagascar 3: Europe's Most Wanted in 2012, more audience and the media began to question the abuse of internet buzzwords in subtitle translation. In the 1st National Forum on Film and Television Translation Studies in 2012, scholars and researchers had a heated debate on the application of Chinese internet buzzwords in subtitle translation, and they failed to reach a consensus eventually. In 2013, Lv and Li analyzed the methods of entertainment-oriented rewriting in subtitle translation under the guidance of Lefebvre's rewriting theory (2004) and explored the reasons behind the rewriting. In 2014, they further stated the sharp contrast between the Eastern and Western culture with its defamiliarizing effect arising from internet buzzwords. Lv and Li (2014) believed that the over localization has weakened the foreign characteristics of movies thereby the target audience has begun to feel tired of entertainment-oriented effects. During this period, some studies ended up with the accusation that this conduct is “disloyal” (Wen, 2013) and “over-entertainment” (Lv & Li, 2013) compared with the original. It is a pity that few studies have touched upon the solutions to the overuse of internet buzzwords.

Also, we can hardly find any foreign studies as for the application of Chinese internet buzzwords in subtitle translation, partly because it is a cultural-specific phenomenon. Accordingly, we attempt to propose the viewpoints concerning their applications in subtitle translation from the perspective of domestication, with the examples taken from some comedy movies released in China between 2012 and 2016, such as Madagascar 3: Europe's Most Wanted, Men in Black III and Kung Fu Panda.

Domestication with Internet Buzzwords

Domestication is the target-culture-oriented translation in which unusual expressions to the target
culture are exploited and turned into some familiar ones so as to make translated texts intelligible and easy for the target readers (Su, 2011). Domestication in subtitle translation with Chinese internet buzzwords in recent years has been highly in use, with the purpose of winning the hearts of audience. It can be found Chinese internet buzzwords are more and more prominent in subtitling, which are featured by colloquialism, conciseness and timeliness. When talking online, people tend to talk informally to show their friendliness, for example “么么哒” (love you, my darling) online is used to create an amicable atmosphere. Netizens are more likely to use homo-phonics, dialects, or newly-created expressions, such as “海龟” (turtle) for “海归” (overseas returnee), in which “龟” and “归” are homo-phonics to each other. “母鸡” (hen) stands for “不知道” (I don’t know) by imitating Chinese Cantonese. “hold 住” (hold on; hold it) as a combination of Chinese and English becomes more prevailing online as well.

Conciseness is an obvious feature of internet buzzwords, mainly for saving time. As a result, many numbers, symbols and abbreviations are well taken. For example, number “2” in “你真 2” (You clown!), is used to make fun of others. We also see people use “ZZZ……” to express their intention to sleep. Three “Z”s are symbols for sleeping and snoring in internet buzzwords. Internet buzzwords somehow reflect the social phenomena and resonate with the social reality. For instance, “世界那么大，我想去看看” (The world is big and I want to see it) is a sentence from the resignation letter of a teacher from Henan, in which she expressed her desire to be free from work pressure and tour around the world. Since then, it has spread everywhere in China. “且行且珍惜” (It is to be cherished) is another sentence from the Weibo of actress Ma Yili shortly after her husband’s love affair. Now it becomes so popular for warning people to cherish what they already have.

Over-domestication in Subtitle Translation with Internet Buzzwords

Is domestication with Chinese internet buzzwords always proper and feasible? Is it always appreciative among the audience? The author chooses some subtitle translations arising from the movie Madagascar 3: Europe’s Most Wanted (2012) as a case study, which tells the story that the zoo animals Alex and his friends join a circus in Europe on their way back to New York. The application of some internet buzzwords has attracted criticism since its appearance. The following are some controversial issues:

E.g.1 Cause you’re too cute to be out here in the real world. 世界这么乱，装萌给谁看。

Example 1 is said by zebra Marty when he sees some small animals in the circus. He tries to tease them because those animals are too tiny and cute in his eyes. But “too cute” is translated into “装萌” (act cute) which changes Marty’s tone, far from the original meaning. Thus, the translation is over domesticated. The revised could be: 你们这么可爱，真不该来这个危险的世界。

E.g.2 That is one ugly, mug-ugly lady! 这是麻辣凤姐吧。

E.g.3 We can do that funk and groove dance thing! 我们做个夫妻档，像小沈阳一样，上星光大道。

E.g.4 I don’t want you to think of me as some sort of authority figure. 你不要把我当成大明星周杰伦。

In example 2 “ugly, mug-ugly lady” is translated into “麻辣凤姐”，referring to an ugly lady disguised by penguins. My view is it is somehow inappropriate, because the image of “凤姐” in Chinese classic novel Hongloumeng, is not ugly at all. Or Luo Yufeng (凤姐) is a lady hot online, known for her narcissism. None of the image in this sense fits the above context. Hence, the translation has totally missed the point and becomes unfaithful at all. Thus, the suggested translation is referred as: 那位女士可真是超级超级丑！

It is also true in the example 3 and 4. Xiao Shenyang and Jay Chou are popular stars in China, who are over-domesticated images in the translation. However, “funk and groove dance” is actually
a kind of western dance, unfamiliar to the Chinese. It is suggested to omit rather than rewrite as in
the Example 3. Lion Alex is asking jaguar Gia not to view him as an authority and not to be afraid
of him. Yet, the translation has totally missed the target and remains unfaithful to the text. The
translation can be revised as follows: 我们可以一起跳舞啊！(Example 3); 我不想你把我当成领导。(Example 4)

Solutions to Over-domestication with Internet Buzzwords

Translation in Line with the Theme of the Movie

When problems arise in terms of over-domestication with too many internet buzzwords in
subtitle translation, we would come up with the following solutions. Firstly, theme must be taken
into account. For instance, it is wise to use them in comedy movies rather than in literary ones or
documentaries, because internet buzzwords are featured by humor and informality. In addition, it
would be more appropriate to apply them in Chinese culture-bound movies. Series of Kung Fu
Panda are the best cases in point. Internet buzzwords with Chinese elements, are currently
well-received by the audience. For instance:

E.g.5 Impressive，Dragon Warrior，很给力，神龙大侠。
E.g.6 Inner peace 心如止水

Translation in Line with the Identity of Certain Character

Secondly, the translation of subtitles should accord with the characters’ personality, identity and
background in the movie. Take Men in Black 3 as an example, Agent K, one of the founding
members of the Men in Black, is a serious agent aged about 50. However, in the example “In case
of what”, it has been over-domesticated into “商你妹啊”，which does not match who Agent K was,
for it is rare to hear Chinese in his 50s speak like that. The plain translation “万一什么?” is more
logically employed in this context. Yet by contrast, it seems that humorous Panda Po is more likely
to use Chinese Internet buzzwords. “宝宝”(Example 7) and “姐”(Example 8) best fit the scene and
his identity. The examples are demonstrated as below:

E.g.7 Would you stop doing that again? 吓死宝宝了。
E.g.8 Try to keep up. 跟上姐的舞步。

Faithfulness to the Original Meaning

The third is we should always focus on faithfulness, the foundation of translation. When this aim
becomes impossible, the flexibility must be controlled within a certain range, otherwise, the
translation will be another “masterpiece” of the translator himself or herself. For example, “麻辣风
姐”(Example 2) for “ugly lady”，and “周杰伦” for “authority figure” (Example 4) are unaccepted.
When translating, translators should take feasibility into consideration before using internet
buzzwords. A few questions need to be answered beforehand: Do these internet buzzwords express
the original meaning of the lines? Will they reduce the accuracy of the translation? Are they proper
in this context?

Avoidance of Commercial Impacts

The fourth is the subtitle translation from English to Chinese must be deprived of commercial
impacts. According to Lv and Li (2013), the excessive use of internet buzzwords as a result of
over-domestication can be attributed to two factors. The first is that most directors and sponsors, out
of commercial motivation, encourage the use of humorous internet buzzwords to cater for the
audience. The second reason is that the subtitles are translated for the prospective audience targeted
by the producers, who are mainly youngsters. To sum up, the over rewritten translations and too
much translation-made humor should be avoided under the context of the commercial impact in the
future.

1130
Conclusion

This study explores the feasibility of applying Chinese internet buzzwords in subtitle translation of comedy movies from the view of domestication. The detailed and explicit analysis has presented the practical solutions to the over-domestication: translation should be in line with the theme of movie, identity of certain character; translation should be faithful to the original meaning and avoid the commercial impacts. The author believes that the application of internet buzzwords in subtitle translation will be more prevailing in the years to come. It’s expected that more studies can be further conducted on this subject from other perspectives soon.

References


