Studying subtitle translation from a multi-modal approach

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1. Introduction

This paper is mainly concerned with the subtitle translation which deals with foreign-language material. In dealing with this kind of subtitle translation, the translator usually focuses on the transferring of two languages and on the specific features that are only related to the subtitle translation, such as the maximum length of a subtitle, the location of subtitles in the film, the speed of switching subtitles. This focus is later switched by certain translation scholars (Henrik Gottlieb 1994; Patrick Zabalbeascoa 1997; Frederic Chaume Varela 1997) to stress that subtitle translation is involved with not only two languages but also two modes. Within this point of view, Gottlieb defines subtitling as “diagonal translation” (1994: 104–105), for which deals with ‘diagonal’ translation from the spoken to the written mode, rather than ‘horizontal’ translation from written to written or from spoken to spoken. He then states that other visual and audio elements (such as music and sound effects) which contribute to verbal elements should be taken into account by the translator, because they are the context where the speech or writing embeds in. Thus, his view of subtitling shows his attempt to consider non-verbal semiotic modes, a move which is supported by other scholars of subtitle translation (Dela bastita 1989, 1990).

I share the view that subtitle translation involves a multiplicity of semiotic modes which give shape to the film text and the subtitled film text. However, I argue that subtitle translation is not “diagonal translation” with regard to verbal elements in visual and audio modes, because verbal elements are no the only semiotic mode(s) that contribute meanings to the film text. I argue that subtitle translation is intersemiotic translation, and that all the semiotic modes involved in the film text contribute meanings according to their functional specialization rather than the verbal elements alone. Thus, different specialized meanings produced by the semiotic modes that appear in the film text have to be included in dealing with subtitle translation.
Within this perspective, this paper focuses on the two interrelated areas: (1) how the concept of mode works in the translating process; that is, how the translator makes use of the specialized meaning of each mode; (2) how the translator represents the meanings of the source text through the target modes; that is, how the translator organizes the specialized meanings to produce the target text designed for the target context.

2. The concept of semiotic mode

To discuss the translation from a multimodal approach, it is important to define the concept of semiotic mode and its relevant terms, such as functional specialization, multimodality.

In this paper, the concept of semiotic mode is based upon certain social semiotic scholars (Fairclough 1992, 1995; O’Sullivan et al. 1994; Nöth 1995; Lemke 1998; Kress 1997; Kress & Van Leeuwen 1996, 2001; Kress et al. 2001) who notice the importance of materiality in making and interpreting signs and meanings. For them, “materiality” is the most fundamental idea, referring to the culturally shaped “constraints and affordances” of material substance (Kress et al. 2001: 15). Therefore, the concept of semiotic mode is defined as follows:

We use medium (and the plural media) to refer to the material substance which is worked on or shaped over time by culture into an organized, regular, socially specific meaning of representation, i.e. a meaning-making resource or a mode (Kress et al. 2001: 15; authors’ italics).

I adopt this definition of mode to deal with subtitle translation. However, it should be noticed that “the question of what is considered a communicative mode remains open” (ibid. 11), because modes are constantly transformed or created in response to the communicative needs of society. Therefore, written and spoken modes are divided from the verbal mode for twofold reasons: first, they are shaped from different materiality; second, both of them have socially specific meanings of representation. The same reasons can be apply to any other modes.

On the basis of this concept of semiotic mode, the social semiotic scholars (Kress 1997; Kress & Van Leeuwen 1996) propose the concept of “multimodality” to account for the multimodal communication; that is, all kinds of meaning making are always employed with a multiplicity of modes of representation. This concept is described as follows:

Language, whether in speech or writing, has always existed as just one mode in the totality of modes involved in the production of any text, spoken or written. A spoken text is not just verbal but also visual, combining with ‘non-verbal’ modes of communication such as facial expression, gesture, posture and other forms of self-presentation.
A written text, similarly, involves more than language: it is written on something, on some material and it is written with something; with letters formed in systems influenced by aesthetic, psychological, pragmatic and other considerations; and with a layout imposed on the material substance, whether on the page, the computer screen or a polished brass plaque (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996: 39; authors’ italics).

Therefore, multimodality concerns how the modes are put together in order to design a semiotic product or event (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001).

In multimodal communication, modes work individually and collectively at the same time. This means, “modes produce meaning in themselves and through their intersection or interaction with each other” (Kress et al. 2001: 14). The meaning-making possibilities enabled by the materiality of each mode raise the question of “functional specialization”. Therefore, the idea of functional specialization is concerned with the meaning potentials which “are resulted from the combined effects of the inherent attributes of the materials and of their transformation over very long stretches of history, in particular cultures of time and culture into modes” (ibid.: 16).

Accordingly, four theoretical points about mode and multimodality are developed. (1) Different modes have different meaning potentials and materiality, which are not always available to or overly comprehended by the audience. (2) All modes have specific social evaluations and demands, so meaning potentials of modes depends on the practical requirements of different communities and on different social contexts. (3) All modes produce meanings through their intersection with each other and their interweaving in the communicative context. (4) All modes are shaped, created, and transformed in response to the need of social semiotic processes, so they are not static but fluid.

Based upon the discussion above, I consider five semiotic modes that are most frequently represented in the film text: the spoken mode, the written mode, the mode of music, the mode of sound effects and the mode of moving images.

3. Multimodal translation process

Up to the present, subtitle translation focuses on the transferring of the spoken mode into the written mode, with special regard to the visual and audio modes. That is, despite of taking visual and audio modes into account, the translator takes them as the context for dealing with subtitling, as mentioned earlier, because they are pre-existed and cannot be changed by the translator. Therefore, in distinction from the translation and interpreting, subtitle translation is considered as ‘diagonal’, as illustrated in Figure 1.
However, though the visual and audio modes are used as the context of the spoken and written modes, their contribution to the meanings of the film text cannot be fully exploited. That is, to consider audiovisual modes as the context means that their interaction with the spoken and written modes is recognized; but it does not explain how they are interacted with each other nor display how their interaction is represented in the text of the subtitled film.

In the multimodal approach, all the semiotic modes represented in the film text are considered as a whole to express and represent meanings to the audience. Therefore, though the written mode is the most frequently-produced form by the translator in subtitling, it does not mean that the translator cannot distribute the meanings of the text to other semiotic modes. For instance, the translator can distribute meanings of the spoken modes (such as dialogues) to the visual modes (the moving images), the audio modes (music or sound effects); that is, the translator does not have to render everything in the dialogues into the subtitles, but he can choose to ignore those meanings that are represented in other semiotic modes. Hence, it is not one-to-one relationships in subtitle translation, but many-to-many, as shown in Figure 2.

In this approach, the equivalence relationships between the source text and the target text is, therefore, more complex than what is illustrated in Figure 1. The translator of subtitle translation is asked to produce the target text, i.e., the subtitled film, as a whole, instead of subtitles only. In addition, as shown in Figure 2, the shape of the source text is different from that of the target text. That is, while translating the meaning potentials of the modes from the source text into the target text, certain meanings may lose or gain in different aspects, so the totality
of the meaning, sense, function and representation will be different between the source text and the target text. Moreover, the realization of a certain mode may not be realized in the equivalent mode in the translating process. That is, the meaning potential of a certain source mode may be realized in more than one mode, possibly including the equivalent mode, in the target text.

To make the idea of the multimodal approach more concrete, I take some examples to show how the concept of mode works in the subtitle translation and how the translator represents the meanings of the source through the target modes in the next two sections.

4. The influence of modes in subtitling

To discuss how the concept of mode influence the process of subtitling, I take the difference between the spoken mode and the written for example. In dealing with subtitle translation, the translator’s decision making is often influenced by the feature of the modes. For instance, in the subtitles of the film *Farewell My Concubine*, the translator deliberately omits the oral expressions, such as ‘Ah’, ‘Mm’ and tag questions, such as ‘doesn’t it’, ‘can they’. Certain instances are shown as underlined in Figure 3.

Oral expressions and tag questions are relatively more often used in the spoken rather than the written mode. Hence, when the translator produces the subtitles, he tends to choose not to represent the features of the spoken mode in the written subtitles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dialogues</th>
<th>Subtitles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>吳梅水流千道到了還得歸海不是</td>
<td>The river’s course is twisted but in the end it flows to the sea!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ah, the water flows in thousands of courses, but in the end, it flows to the sea, doesn’t it?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>共產黨來了也得聽戲不是</td>
<td>But even the Communists have to have opera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Communists have to have opera, don’t they?</td>
<td>have to have opera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>怎麼著還敢打人家傷兵不敢吧</td>
<td>Well, do you still want to fight their ragtag troops?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well, you dare fight their ragtag troops, don’t you?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>程老闆您熬不住您就再抽一口得了</td>
<td>Mister Cheng, if you cannot take it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Cheng, if you cannot take it, have another smoke, all right?</td>
<td>have another smoke</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3. Examples of source dialogues and target subtitles from *Farewell My Concubine*
The transformation of syntactical structures is another obvious example that often appears in the process of subtitling. In the spoken mode, the syntactical structure tends to be clause-chains, but in the written mode, it tends to be sentences. Therefore, if the source text is represented in the structure that is composed by several clause-chains, the translator tends to break the chain and re-structure it into the surface form of sentences. For instance, in the subtitles of *Farewell My Concubine*, an utterance is composed of five clauses, as (1)您要是有袁四爺那譜兒 (If you had Master Yuan’s class), (2) 那行 (that could be all right), (3) 甭管哪朝哪代 (You don’t need to care which dynasty), (4) 人家永遠是爺 (He is always the master), and (5) 咱們不同 (We are not the same); these are represented as two sentences by the translator as

(1) If you had Master Yuan’s class, you’d prosper …,
(2) no matter who was in power, and
(3) It is not the same for us!

The differences between the spoken and written modes are much discussed under the issue of linguistic transference. Therefore, in this section I just want to point out the translator’s decision in dealing with the representation of subtitles is, without doubt, influenced by the materiality of the relevant semiotic modes of film. To put it in the other way, the translator makes use of the other semiotic modes of film to represent the meanings of the film text, instead of the subtitles. For instance, the translator uses two dashes ‘--’ at the end of subtitles, to represent that those subtitles are not complete and are not going to be complete.

The unfinished subtitles imply that the missing meanings of the unfinished part are not expressed by the spoken mode but by other semiotic modes that are involved in the film text. The underlined subtitle, *Today my fellow actor is --*, is not complete in this subtitle, and is not finished in the utterance by the character in the film, so the translator uses two dashes to represent the situation. The unfinished subtitle and dialog are taken up by the meanings represented in the moving images and music, in which the audience in the film stands up and sings communist party songs.

Therefore, to approach subtitle translation from the perspective of mode helps the translator to understand the way meanings transferred across the modes represented in the film text.

5. The distribution and integration of modes in subtitling

In this section, I discuss how the translator represents the meanings of the source text through the target modes by looking at the distribution and integration of modes in doing subtitle translation respectively.
In other words, I want to show that the distribution of the modes in the text of subtitled film is not only from the spoken mode to the written mode, but also two other situations: 1) from other semiotic modes into the written modes and 2) from the spoken to other relevant semiotic modes. Then I would like to discuss how the translator integrates the meanings of multiple semiotic modes in terms of considering the wholeness of equivalent relationships between the source and target texts. To illustrate, I use some examples, which is also from *Farewell My Concubine*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dialogue</th>
<th>Subtitle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>四兒要什麼給人家什麼</td>
<td>Xiao Si …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xiao Si, let them have whatever they want</td>
<td>have them sing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>可千萬別動手</td>
<td>whatever the crowd wants to hear.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But never fight with them</td>
<td>Just avoid a scene.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 5.** An example of the source dialogues and target subtitles

In Figure 5, the source utterance, *Xiao Si, let them have whatever they want*, is not culture-specific or social-specific, so the target audience has no difficulty in understanding it. However, the translator represents this utterance as *Xiao Si, have them sing whatever the crowd wants to hear*. The transformations from ‘have’ to ‘sing’ and from ‘want’ to ‘wants to hear’ show that, apart from the meanings of the source dialogues, the translator selects meanings from the mode of music, which is a section from the Peking opera, *Farewell My Concubine*, and from the mode of moving images, which display the two main characters performing *Farewell My Concubine* on the stage.

Therefore, this instance illustrates how the other semiotic modes (i.e., moving images and music here) contribute their specific meanings to the process of subtitling. The translator integrates the meanings of a certain section of dialogues, moving images and music to create the meanings that make sense to the target audience as that to the source audience. To put it in another way, if the translator does not integrate the meanings from the modes of moving images and music, the target audience is very likely to miss the meanings of why the utterance is expressed at that particular time and in that particular social occasion. That is, in the source text, the utterance ‘let them have whatever they want’ is a metaphor, implying that the two characters have no choice to sing whatever they want but to supply the audience’s demand at that particular time and social occasion. Without the social occasion represented in the moving images and the Peking opera in the mode of music, even the source audience would feel difficult to understand the mean-
ings embedded in this specific section of the source text. Consequently, when the translator integrates the meanings of the music and the moving images, the subtitle certainly lose meanings of using the metaphor in the utterance, but it signifies the wholeness of the meanings represented in the source text.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moving images</th>
<th>Subtitles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Moving images" /></td>
<td>1948: EVE OF THE NATIONALIST EVACUATION TO TAIWAN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>THE COMMUNISTS HAVE SURROUNDED THE CITY</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6. An example of the moving images and target subtitles

In Figure 6, there are two subtitles: one is transformed from the written signs in the moving images, and the other from the moving images. To be specific, the first subtitle, 1948: EVE OF THE NATIONALIST EVACUATION TO TAIWAN, is rendered from the written signs, 一九四八年國民政府離開大陸之前 (the back translation could be: in 1948, before the nationalists leave the mainland China). However, the second subtitle, THE COMMUNISTS HAVE SURROUNDED THE CITY, is not derived from the source dialogues, nor from the written signs, but from the moving images and sound effects in the preceding shots: these images show that military trucks, tanks and soldiers are moving into the city, and ordinary people are running away from them, together with the sound effects of people screaming, running, of objects falling to the ground and of firing pistols and blowing whistles.

Therefore, the second subtitle illustrates how other semiotic modes (except the spoken and written modes) contribute their meanings to the process of subtitling. The translator integrates certain sections of the previous moving images and sound effects to create the meanings that make sense to the target audience. Unlike the previous example in Figure 5, this subtitle is created not to explain what is signified in the dialogues, but to indicate what is signified in the moving images and sound effects. In other words, what is signified in the moving images and sound effects may not be comprehended by the source audience, if they are familiar with the representation of the visual signs and sounds that are related to the social and historical context represented in the film text. This shows that the functional specializations of the moving images and sound effects are concerned
with the contextual meanings, which is social-specific in this section, for the subsequent film text. Therefore, if the translator chooses not to render the specialized meanings of these two semiotic modes into the subtitles, it could influence on the target audience’s understanding of the following subtitles. That is, the translator creates this subtitle to make the target text as a meaningful whole by integrating the specialized meanings of the semiotic modes involved in the target text.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characters</th>
<th>Dialogues</th>
<th>Subtitles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A person in the audience</td>
<td>(14) 打倒反革命份子袁四清 Down with the counter-revolutionary Yuan Shiquing!</td>
<td>Down with the counter-revolutionary Yuan Shiquing!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The audience</td>
<td>(15) 打倒反革命份子袁四清 Down with the counter-revolutionary Yuan Shiquing!</td>
<td>Yuri Shiqing is an enemy of the people and he must die!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A person in the audience</td>
<td>(16) 袁四清以反動為題死路一條 Yuan Shiqing is an enemy of the people and he must die!</td>
<td>Yuri Shiqing must die.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The audience</td>
<td>(17) 袁四清死路一條 Yuan Shiqing must die.</td>
<td>We must raise our level of vigilance!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A person in the audience</td>
<td>(18) 提高警惕 Raise our level of vigilance</td>
<td>We must raise our level of vigilance!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The audience</td>
<td>(19) 提高警惕 Raise our level of vigilance</td>
<td>We must raise our level of vigilance!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 7. Examples of the source dialogues and target subtitles

Figure 7 shows the second situation of distribution of modes in the process of subtitling. Instead of representing all source dialogues in the written mode, the subtitles, the meanings of certain utterances, which are underlined, are distributed to other semiotic modes: in the moving images, we can see the communists are gathered in a court room to attack and sentence the crime of Mr. Yuan publicly. The crowds of communists are led to shouting slogans: we can hear one person in the crowds shouts slogans and then the crowds follow him. We also hear the crowds’ oops and anguish sounds to show their resentment to Mr. Yuan. The underlined utterances are purposefully omitted by the translator in dealing with subtitling. In this case, the translator chooses to omit them is partly because the meanings of these utterances are repetitions, and partly because they are slogans. By choosing not to render them into subtitles, the translator actually integrates the meanings of the spoken with the meanings of the moving images and sound effects. This shows the translator takes the semiotic modes involved in the target text as a whole to represent the meanings of the source text.
6. Conclusion

This paper investigates the concept of multimodality in the process of subtitle translation. I have discussed that different semiotic modes contribute different kinds to meanings to the film text. Therefore, subtitle translation does not deal with one-to-one relationship but many-to-many in terms of the concept of semiotic mode. Furthermore, because of the multi-modal relationships, the translator has to consider the distribution and integration of the meanings of multimodes in order to create kind of equivalent wholeness between the source and target texts. Therefore, this paper attempts to show that if the semiotic modes involved in the film text are treated equally, dealing with subtitle translation means to approach the film text and the subtitled film as a whole, which is assumed to be the primary concern in the process of subtitling. However, the functional specializations of semiotic modes, which help the translator to deal with distribution of integration of meanings, are very general and need further researches in the future if one approaches the subtitle translation from the perspective of semiotic modes.

References


Résumé

Cet article étudie la traduction des sous-titres dans une approche multimodale. L’approche de la traduction des sous-titres dans une perspective multimodale est une tentative de l’envisager comme une traduction intersémiotique. Il suggère qu’à l’instar du mode parlé, la traduction des sous-titres implique d’autres modes sémiotiques, comme le mode des effets sonores, le mode des images mobiles, le mode musical et le mode écrit. Ce faisant, cet article adopte une approche dans laquelle la multiplicité des modes dans un film est considérée comme étant représentée dans la traduction des sous-titres. D’un point de vue théorique, il suppose que tous les modes bénéficient d’une attention tout aussi sérieuse.

Dans cette perspective, cet article se concentre sur deux domaines étroitement liés :

1. la manière dont le concept du mode fonctionne dans le processus de traduction ; c’est-à-dire la façon dont le traducteur utilise la signification spécialisée de chaque mode et
2. la manière dont le traducteur représente la signification du texte source par le biais des modes cibles ; c’est-à-dire la façon dont il organise les significations spécialisées pour produire le texte cible conçu pour le contexte cible.

Par conséquent, cet article cherche à comprendre les interrelations de la matérialité et de la représentation de la traduction des sous-titres, pour examiner comment on utilise, dans la traduction des sous-titres, les ressources jadis ignorées et pourtant significatives de la multiplicité des modes, et pour contribuer à se rapprocher d’un cadre théorique satisfaisant pour traiter de la traduction des sous-titres.

Abstract

This paper investigates subtitle translation from a multi-modal approach. Approaching subtitle translation from a multi-modal perspective is an attempt to consider subtitle translation as intersemiotic translation. It suggests that subtitle translation involves more than the spoken mode, but also involves other semiotic modes, such as the mode of sound effects, the mode of moving images, the mode of music and the written mode. In doing this, this paper takes an approach in which the multiplicity of modes in film is represented in the subtitle translation. From a theoretical point of view, it assumes that all modes are given equally serious attention.

From this perspective, this paper focuses on two interrelated areas: (1) how the concept of mode works in the translating process; that is, how the translator makes use of the specialized
meaning of each mode (2) how the translator represents the meaning of the source text through the target modes; that is, how the translator organizes the specialized meanings to produce the target text designed for the target context.

In other words, this paper aims to understand the interrelations of the materiality and the representation of subtitle translation, to explore the previously-ignored but significant resources in the multiplicity of modes of subtitle translation, and to help to come closer to a satisfactory theoretical framework to deal with subtitle translation.

About the Author

Ying-Ting Chuang is currently an assistant professor in the Department of English, in the National Kaohsiung First University of Science and Technology. Her research area is mainly concerned with multimodal translation and approaching translation from a social semiotic perspective. She attempts to deal with the interrelationships between sign activities and the social and cultural environment and the interpersonal factors in the meaning making process, which surely includes the translating process.

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