Interpreting Intertextuality in AVT

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Abstract

Focusing on the semiotic context of translation, the current study explores the issue of intertextuality in audio visual translation. With the English drama series *Downton Abbey* and two subtitle versions in Chinese mainland and Hong Kong as data, the study discovers the necessity to distinguish the virtual context from the real-life context when dissecting the semiotic interactions in AVT. Meaning indeterminacy is closely related to how semiotic structures are recognized and divided in the original virtual reality, while systematic consistency demonstrated in the target text is largely bound by the social, cultural conventions and existing media practices that are well attuned to the specific target audiences.

Key words: AVT; Intersexuality; Semiotic Interaction

INTRODUCTION

Post-structuralist literary critics, such as Kristeva, Bakhtin, Roland Barthes, generally believed that meaning is not fixed and interpretation of texts always entail ideological bias. The idea of the text, and thus of intertextuality, depends, as Barthes argues, on the figure of the web, the weave, the garment (text) woven from the threads of the "already written" and the "already read" (Allen, 2000, p.3, 34, 36).

Since the meaning of signs is fluid, the source text is not a closed entity that can be objectively interpreted. Transferring meaning across languages and cultures necessitates the replacement of signs, which are more or less tinted with the color of personal values, cultural assumptions and social conventions. Concerning audiovisual translation (AVT), the prevalent feature of imported TV programs and films, how are the transformed signs in the TT interacting with the source input and the target sign system? How can we interpret some of the more nuanced cultural connotations in AVT from the perspective of intertextuality? This is what the following analysis strives to explore.

INTERTEXTUALITY IN THE CONTEXT OF TRANSLATION STUDIES

The concept of intertextuality was first proposed by the French post-structuralist literary critic Julia Kristeva in the late 1960s. She referred to texts in terms of two axes: a horizontal axis connecting the author and reader of a text, and a vertical axis, which connects the text to other texts (Kristeva 1980, p.69). Therefore, she argued that structuration rather than structure of texts should be the focus of study. James E. Porter (1986, p.35) has distinguished two types of intertextuality as iterability and presupposition. The former refers textual fragments that include not only explicit allusions, references, and quotations within a discourse, but also unannounced sources and influences, clichés, phrases and traditions. The latter refers to assumptions a text makes about its referent, its readers, and its context, things that have been read but not explicitly there.

Based on Halliday's discourse analysis theory and such post-structuralist views, Hartim and Mason have introduced the dimension of semiotic analysis into the domain of translation studies, identifying 'intertextuality' as the essential binding force in the semiotic dimension

of context. In Hatim and Mason's (2001, p.69) account of semiotics-conscious translating, they point out that the way a semiotic entity is translated is partially determined by the three major semiotic categories: genre, discourse and text. Text producers and receivers necessarily engage in the composition or reception of 'attitudinal meanings' within a particular genre. This attitudinal, interpersonal component is discourse. It is a conceptual system "which regulate the process whereby the denotative meaning of an element in a text acquires an extra connotative meaning" (Hatim & Mason 2001, p.71). Discoursal values are manifestations of the power relations in a given cultural and social system, through which ideology is defined (Hatim 2001, p.31).

The semiotic dimension as Hatim and Mason single out leads our exploration of translation context to a broader world, the world of signs. In language communication, signs are employed by the interlocutors to exchange meanings. From a semiotic standpoint, analysis of the text occurrences can reveal not only the interaction between the interlocutors of a particular communicative process, but also the interaction between the language users and the signs, and the interaction among signs themselves within the text and among other texts. It is in this sense that we come to appreciate the dynamics of signs, the perception and interpretation of which is inevitably influenced by the principle of intertexuality. Through all these different levels of semiotic interaction, the indeational, textual and interpersonal meanings of a text are relayed against a larger backdrop, where the prior and relevant occurrence of the signs accumulates their semiotic contexts.

AVT SAMPLE ANALYSIS

Sample AVT excerpts from the Chinese subtitled versions of Downton Abbey are compared and analyzed with focus on the intertextuality interplay within. The two versions are respectively produced by the China Central Television Channel Eight (referred to as CCTV-8 hereunder) and Hong Kong TVB Pearl Channel (referred to as TVB-Pearl hereunder).

Example A:

Mrs. Crawley introduced her son and herself to the new butler when they moved to their new house near Downton Abbey: "I'm Mrs. Crawley, and this is my son, Mr. Matthew Crawley."

CCTV-8 subtitle: 我是克劳利夫人 这是我的儿子马修·克劳利 (I'm Mrs. Crawley. This is my son Matthew Crawley.)

TVB-Pearl subtitle: 我是葛太太，他是小儿葛文修 (I am Mrs. Ge. He is my humble child Ge Wenxiu.)

Example B:

Earl Grantham introduced Mrs. Crawley and her son to his mother when they were invited to visit Downton Abbey for the first time: "Mama, may I present Matthew Crawley and Mrs. Crawley?"

CCTV-8 subtitle: 妈妈 请允许我介绍马修和克劳利夫人 (Mom, please allow me to introduce Matthew and Mrs. Crawley.)

TVB-Pearl subtitle: 媽媽，容我介紹葛文修和葛太太 (Mom, let me introduce Ge Wenxiu and Mrs. Ge)

Example C:

When first introduced to the Dowager Countess of Grantham, Mrs. Crawley asked her how they should address each other. The Dowager Countess of Grantham answered "Well, we could always start with Mrs. Crawley and Lady Grantham."

CCTV-8 subtitle: 可以叫我格兰瑟姆伯爵夫人(You can call me Countess Grantham.)

TVB-Pearl subtitle: 葛太太和格蘭瑟姆伯爵夫人就好了(Mrs. Ge and Countess Grantham will be fine.)

In the mainland China version, all characters adopt westernized transliterated names; while the Hong Kong version takes a more domesticated approach, taking into account both the phonetic features of the original and the Chinese convention of names and forms of address. "Ge Wenxiu" is a typical example of converting the English name into the common Chinese naming practice of a single-character surname plus a double-character given name structure. Apart from creating a kind of cultural affinity, it also helps to save screens space, which is a constant constraint and concern in AVT. And the choice of feminine/masculine words for corresponding female/male character names in TVB's subtitles reflects another interesting aspect of semiotic interaction. It is also a means of domestication that facilitates instant recognition, making the sign more relevant to the target audience.

The tendency in domesticating foreign names in TVB's version has to do with Hong Kong's history as a British colony and a place where east meets west. Foreigners once ruled the place and live alongside locals in the Chinese community. It's common for the foreigners there to adopt a Chinese style name for the ease of everyday life contact with locals and as a gesture of cultural respect. In contrast, on the mainland of China, foreigners are cultural others that mostly living outside of the Chinese community and therefore referred to by signs that signal such foreignness, ie. foreignized transliteration names. Such presupposed intertextuality is aptly reflected in the two subtitle versions above.

Putting the different translated forms of address back into specific contexts, we can detect the translators' active participation in the semiotic interaction between source input and target sign system. If in the original semiotic setting, "Lady" is an honorific signifying membership in the nobility in-group and "Mrs." a title for the ordinary folk, the two subtitle versions strive to keep such distinction of hierarch manifest and systematic, even though their actual choice of expressions for translating the title "Mrs." are different. Meanwhile, Traces of the translator's active manipulation can also be detected,

which could be promoted by the need of target culture convention and optimal portrayal of character personality and situational nuance. In Example A, Mrs. Crawley introduced her son as "Mr. Matthew Crawley" to the servant. CCTV-8's subtitle leaves out the title "Mr.", while TVB's version renders the whole reference as "小兒葛文修", adding the traditional self-deprecating term "my humble child" as well as removing the title "Mr." Such examples have shown us the tension of multiple layers of semiotic interactions taking place within and between texts, amongst signs, between signs and users, texts and cultures. The systematic approach by both TV stations in treating foreign names and titles have in turn created their own system of intertextuality, a particular genre, reinforcing semantic coherence and rapid recognition on the part of their different target viewers.

Example D:

When asked by the Duke of Crowborough whether she's pleased to be alone with him, she replied: "Oh dear, if I answer truthfully you'll think me rather forward."

CCTV-8 subtitle: 要是我说真话, 就太不矜持了(If I tell the truth it'll be too undemure.)

TVB-Pearl subtitle:若我說喜歡，你會以為我很開放 (If I say I am pleased, you will think that I am very open.)

Example E:

Lady Mary reflected on her fatal romantic adventure with Mr Pamuk, feeling mortified: "I took a lover with no thought of marriage - a Turk! Oh, think of that!"

CCTV-8 subtitle: 我竟然会对一个土耳其浪荡公子投怀送抱, 多么自轻自贱 (I actually threw myself into the arms of a Turkish wanton playboy. How self-depreciating and self-destructing!)

TVB-Pearl subtitle:我跟他親熱, 明知道不會成婚, 他更要是土耳其人, 實在不堪！ (I am intimate with him, knowing that he's not for marriage. And he's a Turk. It's really unbearable!)

People's appreciation and judgment of things, and affect might all be relegated into two broad categories: positive and negative. But they actually fall on a certain point along a continuum. And it is the scale against which thing are evaluated that really matters. A "good wife" might be defined as "beautiful", "capable" or "faithful"… depending on the value system where the person is judged. Thompson (1996: 65) has pointed out that the choice of evaluation scale reflects the different values of different cultural groups.

In Example D, "rather forward" is translated as "太不矜持" (too undemure) and "很開放"by the two Chinese subtitling teams. Rendering the character's self-judgment as contradictory to the "demure" cultural proper for ladies, the former translation manifests a stronger sense of criticism than the original and the latter translation, which express the idea with affirmative adjectives. The word "矜持" is typically associated with female virtue in the Chinese vocabulary and reflects a sexually biased

discourse, which might not be of any concern to viewers or even the translator who are so entrenched in the habitual collocation that for them it's no more than a conditional response. Similarly, in Example E, the CCTV-8 subtitle interprets "a lover with no thought of marriage" as "浪荡公子" (wonton playboy), leveling heavy criticism on one that seek sexual intimacy but "with no thought of marriage". Another example of such revelation of attitudinal discourse lies in the explicitation of "that" in "just think of that". The CCTV-8 subtitle converts it into mainly adjectives (self-depreciating, self-destructing), basically passing judgment on "that"---a noble lady's love adventure with a man with no intention of marriage. Such attitude is no doubt implied in the character's original lines, but by converting a noun into an adjective, attitudinal values are revealed in a more direct way. In fact, the translator has considerable latitude in interpreting the line, even when the subtitle has to match the unfolding story plot and all the audio/visual cues. So through this adaptation process, not only the characters' values are delivered, the translator's own personal attitudes also come into play, conscious or not. It is in this sense that intertextuality might be a window for us to get glimpses into the value systems beneath our all too familiar use of signs.

DISCUSSION

The examples above are some of the less noticeable intertexuality-informed AVT practice. The translation techniques of omission, amplification and conversion are widely and flexibly used, not so much out of syntactical concerns as a broader consideration of intertextuality. The omitted or supplemented element in the TT might seem optional as compared with the original, but since it fulfils the collocation/textual/social habits, the approach is more target culture oriented and therefore more readily appreciated by its target audience. The modified linguistic realization is not a random rewriting of the ST, but a product of active interaction between the translator and the internal and external semiotic environments of the TV drama. First, the source signs serve as the basis for initiating a rendition; second, as the plot unfolds, the translator is constantly linking current lines with prior events, working out an internally coherent interpretation which entails certain personal judgment; third, the translator represents the interpretation with a set of target signs, which invariably triggers association of cultural oriented values and attitudes. The examples share one characteristic. That is, the semiotic interaction is not contained within the isolated line under translation, but it is an interaction moving back and forth in the whole text and outside the text.

Genre membership and discoursal values are in turn manifested in texts. Texts are "units of interaction, both intended and accepted as coherent and cohesive wholes only when realizing a set of mutually relevant communicative intentions appropriate to a given rhetorical

purpose" (Hatim 2001, p.32). Different rhetorical purpose might exert certain textual constraints on the composition of a text, such as the distinction between 'arguing' and 'narrating'. Within the well-built construct of a text, the signs are supposed to be constantly co-referring to each other or at least logically relevant. In terms of striking an equally coherent and cohesive realization of the language potentials of the original, the translator has a daunting mission of managing both source information and target textual devices. From the examples above we can see while the signs are not necessarily literally replicated in the TT, the interaction among signs within the original text is incorporated into the translator's consideration in representing the textual meaning of the original. In AVT, semiotic interaction is a complex process where the translator's subjective thinking, the co-text with the unfolding story plot and the conventional use of ST signs and TT signs combine to exert influence of intertextuality. Cultural imprints of the target sign system can be found throughout a translated text, sometimes without the translator's conscious awareness, for attitudinal value is not only a matter of the translator's personal judgment, but is also ingrained in the sign system as stringed up linguistic associations.

As the sample analysis reveals, the meaning potential of the original dialogues can be explored through not only the individual stretches of ST, but also the co-text and the visual information on screen. That is to say, the ST is just one of many sources of meaning contribution. Nord has made it clear that "the role of the source text in functionalist approaches is…no longer the first and foremost criterion for the translator's decisions… a text used as a source in a translational action may be regarded as an offer of information" (2001:25). Offering information and assisting target audience in understanding the play or program is the major function of subtitles. This means the on-screen actions and dialogues should be provided with adequate and comprehensible subtitles. Apart from this basic requirement, the TT is often expected to be appealing with colloquial and idiomatic affinity, especially in film and TV drama translation, which opens up space for more intertextual manipulation.

Regardless of how distant an adaptation is from the original literal meaning, coherence is a vital textual factor a translator has to abide by. TT signs are expected to be deployed in a way that continuity of sense and experience is maintained throughout the whole text. The textuality of the original provides a framework for meaning retrieval on the translator's part. Even though semantic content is changed, the original coherence relation is supposed to be retained in the TT. The examples above demonstrate the feasibility of forging a consistent discourse with adapted surface features. With regard to AVT, coherence is not only text-bound, the concept should be extended to include the ongoing actions on the visual channel. In fact, the multi-channel feature with AVT is allowing more participants

into the semiotic dimension of context. It means the latitude for a translator is expanded, for the communication is a multi-channel one and therefore linguistic cohesive devices are not the only recourse for constructing a coherent TT. However, the latitude is not without any boundary. The adaptation has to be coherent within the text and coordinated with the events shown in the pictures. Otherwise, it is just utter wayward transgression.

CONCLUSION

By looking at the translation of character names and titles, and the way attitudes and values are revealed in the AVT samples, this article delves into the realm of semiotic intertextuality in AVT. Hatim and Mason's theoretic construct of the semiotic context is a valid proposition for us to explore the issue of intertextuality in the field of translation studies. But for the discussion of semiotic interactions in AVT, it is necessary to distinguish the virtual from the real-life context. Meaning indeterminacy is closely related to how semiotic structures are recognized and divided in the original virtual reality, while systematic consistency demonstrated in target text is largely bound by the social, cultural conventions and existing media practices that are well attuned to the specific target audiences. Meanwhile, such consistency has in turn created its own system of intertextuality and genre, reinforcing semantic coherence and rapid recognition by relevant target viewers. For the AVT translator, as mediator of cross-cultural communication, the latitude and constraints are hand in hand, as intertextuality in such practice involves more extra-linguistic elements.

The limitation with this tentative investigation lies mainly in the data sampling. A more comprehensive corpus for analysis will provide more definitive support for the results yielded. The correlation between program genre, translator cultural background, and the use of adaptive technique can be an intriguing orientation for future studies.

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