

On Phatic Communion Translation in Subtitle from the Perspective of Politeness Principles: A Case Study of the Chinese Subtitle of American TV Series *Why Women Kill*

LEI Yu^[a]; ZHAO Yushan^{[a]*}

^[a]School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China.

* Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Phatic communion conversations are culturally-constrained speech acts happening every day and everywhere. Different cultural backgrounds between China and America will lead to the different applications of phatic communion. Considering American TV series as a mass media for cultural exchanges, subtitle plays a vital role in bridging two cultures.

This paper introduces the related researches at home and abroad on phatic communion, summarizes the main methods adopted in translating different types of phatic communion by analyzing all the collected phatic communion conversations in *Why Women Kill*. The investigation of whether the subtitled phatic communion achieving the same illocutionary meaning that the original speakers trying to convey under the guide of politeness principles has been completed. The conclusion can be drawn as follows: the translator tends to apply different strategies in translating different types of phatic communion such as literal translation, paraphrase, cultural substitution, addition, condensation and specification methods to achieve the pragmatic equivalence between the original and the subtitle.

Key words: Phatic communion; Subtitle translation; Politeness principles; *Why Women Kill*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of phatic communion was first proposed by Malinowski after he found the situation that interpersonal communication is not always for the purpose of providing and obtaining certain information, but for establishing and maintaining social contact. In the paper *on the problem of meeting in primitive languages* published in 1923, he defined this kind of communication as phatic communication, which is born to be communicative, the essential attribute of greetings. There is no doubt that, as a social phenomenon, phatic communion has many social characteristics. Now, under the new trendy notion of communicative competence in language teaching, studies on phatic communion is getting vital. This paper aims to find out whether the subtitled phatic communion could appropriately convey the illocutionary meaning of the source text in the latest American TV series.

1.1 Characteristics of Phatic Communion

From the perspective of discourse mode, phatic communion could be recognized by its corresponding behavior. According to Austin's Speech Act Theory, phatic behavior is a kind of behavior implemented by speaking, that is, communication. The use of greetings is conditionally limited, which is also one of the criteria to distinguish them from other language types. For one hand, phatic communion is the embodiment of phatic behavior. For another hand, phatic communion or utterances are restricted by phatic behavior.

Served as oral expression of social communication, phatic communion is national and regional. Meanwhile, the manner of phatic communion differs from man to man, thus it could be seen as objective and contemporary (Guo & Dong, 2007). In the macroscopic view, languages stem from culture. The influence of cultural differences on the translation of phatic communion is very subtle. If people underestimate it, they will not be able to communicate, and misunderstanding and conflicts are inevitable if the

meaning transfer is not appropriate. In the translation of phatic communion, translators must grasp the cultural differences between different nationalities, such as lifestyles, thinking patterns, and value system (Chen & Lei, 2008).

1.2 Basic Forms of Phatic Communion

According to Zhang Yan (2012), phatic communication could be divided into two categories: program and non-program in terms of content and use frequency. Each category has more detailed branches. Classification of phatic communion is a dynamic process since the qualitative researches and delimitation study in this field are developing vigorously. Some scholars believe that it can absorb various language forms due to its rich denotation and inclusiveness. Four well-accepted basic linguistic forms of phatic communion are as below.

First comes to greetings. Greetings are often used in interpersonal communication. The second is the inquiry. People usually use interrogative sentences to express their concerns. By the way, asking each other about certain aspects of the situation could help deepening feelings or further opening a conversation. The third is the retrospection. Retrospective greetings generally refer to the speaker's words which make the listener feel concerned. The fourth is making comments. There are two most common types of critical greetings: one is a comment on the weather; the other is a comment on the speaker or his objects.

2. POLITENESS PRINCIPLES

To achieve the purpose of communication from the start to the end in a happy atmosphere, speakers must apply to communicative strategies. Phatic communion is closely related to Politeness Principle. Leech (1983) points out that the principle of politeness is to minimize belittling or praising others as much as possible. Politeness Principle includes six maxims: tact maxim, generosity maxim, approbation maxim, modesty maxim, agreement Maxim and Sympathy Maxim. Watts (2003) analyzed the maxims by dividing them in three pairs.

1) Tact Maxim and Generosity Maxim

The former makes others suffer the least and benefit the most, while the latter tries to reduce the derogation and exaggerate the praise to others.

2) Approbation Maxim and Modesty Maxim

This pair basically puts the starting point on themselves. The former makes the least benefit and the most damage, while the latter tries to narrow the praise and exaggerate the derogation.

3) Agreement Maxim and Sympathy Maxim

Contrast to the second pair, these two maxims of politeness principles are mainly based on the relationship between oneself and others. The former tries to narrow down the differences between oneself and others,

exaggerate the agreement between oneself and others, while the latter tries to narrow down his dislike of others and exaggerate his sympathy for others.

Politeness can be divided into positive politeness and negative politeness. Positive politeness is mainly a remedy for the hearer's positive face, that is, to meet his communicative needs and achieve his communicative purpose through verbal communication; negative politeness is mainly a politeness compensation behavior for the hearer's negative face, and the speaker hopes his behavior will not be hindered through negative politeness.

When there is politeness, there must be violation of politeness. Studies on impoliteness dig into the reverse side of politeness which also represent a step forward to speech act theory. Chinese scholars Li Huixue and Zhang Guanzhi found in their study of impoliteness that Chinese and American couples prefer to adopt positive impoliteness strategies in conflict, among which criticism strategies are the most frequently used in both Chinese and American corpus, while rejection strategies are the third; in Chinese corpus, inappropriate identity tags are the second most frequently used strategy, while in English corpus, however, taboos and satirical strategies take the second place. This kind of violation of politeness principle should also be fully considered in translation so as to realize illocutionary meaning.

3. PHATIC COMMUNION TRANSLATION AND ITS TRANSLATION METHODS

Translation is not only an information expression of the original text, but also an activity of cross-cultural communication. The translation of phatic communion is also the focus of research. In the relevant research, scholars have cited many specific examples to illustrate the mismatch between Chinese and English phatic communion. In view of this situation, it is agreed that translation should follow the premise of "functional equivalence" by adopting flexible methods such as "literal translation" and "modified translation" (Wang Shanzhen, 2006). From the perspective of politeness principle, considering the three characteristics of subtitle translation: "information transmission", "cultural preservation" and "entertainment", many innovative and ingenious translation strategies and methods can be adopted in the field of subtitle translation, including domestication, free translation, negation, diction and conversion.

3.1 *Why Women Kill*

Why Women Kill is an American dark comedy-drama web television series created by Marc Cherry for CBS All Access. Set in multiple time periods, the series depicts the events leading to a death that occurs after the respective husbands of three married women commit adultery. It follows three women from different decades

who are connected through having all lived in the same Pasadena mansion and experiencing infidelity in their marriages. Since the second half of 2019 when its first season became one of most popular American TV series, subtitle translation of *Why Women Kill* plays a great role in show branding, which impresses audience by fresh expression and humor. Reputed as the most anticipated series of 2021 on Douban, a Chinese social networking website, the second season premiered on the June of 2021 and then unsurprisingly caused a large commotion on social networks worldwide. Therefore, this paper makes an analysis on its Chinese subtitle translation.

3.2 Subtitle Translation of Phatic Communion

Audio-visual translation is quite unique for its multidimensional representation. Literary works are the art of written words, while film and television works are comprehensive art. When the audience hears the actor's speech, they also see the actor's facial expression. Chinese scholar Qian Shaochang (2000), pointed out that the characteristics of film and television language lie in its listening, comprehensiveness, instantaneity, popularity and non-annotation. In terms of 4 basic forms of phatic communion, subtitle translation of phatic communion in *Why Women Kill*, this paper picks conversations that represent special traits of subtitling.

3.2.1 Domestication

In the subtitle translation of *Why Women Kill*, domestication is frequently adopted. Domestication designates the type of translation in which a transparent, fluent style is adopted to minimize the strangeness of the foreign text for target language readers.

Example 1

Tommy: How many do you want?

Naomi: Leave the tray.

汤米: 你想要几份呢?

娜欧蜜: 一盘都归我。

At the party, Tommy, the waiter, asked Naomi if she wanted to eat soufflé. She directly replied "leave the tray", which could be translated into "留下这个盘子" by literal translation where the meaning is unclear. The subtitle translation of "all the plates belong to me" followed the Tact Maxim in the politeness principle, which shows her love for the party and her straightforward personality.

Example 2

Beth Ann: You want to see the same old Beth? Fine. Here she is in all her glory.

贝丝·安: 你想看到从前的贝丝? 好啊, 老娘在此, 胴光闪耀。

When the housewife Beth Ann dressed up with a new-done hair, her husband was totally unmoved. She showed up naked in the restaurant in a fit of rage. This sentence "Fine. Here she is in all her glory." is used to evaluate herself from the perspective of bystanders. The original subject "she" is translated into "老娘" in Chinese, which reflects her inner anger. In the face of her cheating

husband, she is confident. Her utterance is translated into four character phrases: "老娘在此, 胴光闪耀" which are commonly used in Chinese. Full of rhythm, it is also the embodiment of approval maxim and agreement maxim.

3.2.2 Free Translation

Different from word-for-word translation, free translation is a method to deliver the intended meaning of the source text without paying attention to details such as syntax, style and so on of the original text.

Example 3

Karl: You must have questions for me. When did I know I was gay? How many men have I been with?

Simone: Karl, please. I just had lunch.

卡尔: 你一定有许多问题要问。我什么时候知道我是同性恋的? 我和多少男人厮混过?

西蒙: 卡尔, 拜托! 别害我把午餐吐出来!

The conversation takes place between Simone, a powerful woman, and her gay husband Karl. In the conversation, we could assume that Simone is actually refusing to communicate with Karl, which is a case of impoliteness. In line with Simone's facial expression at that scene, the subtitle "别害我把午餐吐出来!" means "don't make me spit out my lunch", which reflects the heroine's impoliteness at that time and strengthens the dramatic response. If adopting the literal translation "我刚刚吃完午餐", the momentum will be cut down a lot immediately.

Example 4

She's happy.

她毫无怨言。

This is Beth Ann's husband's response to neighbors' accusations of disrespect to his own wife. This response "She's happy." simply shows his attitude to his wife. He is so confident as if Beth herself has no thought at all. The Chinese subtitle "她毫无怨言" does not mention the wife's happiness, but points out she is meekly accepting the adversity of her environment. The subtitle highlights the husband's habit and superiority, which obeys the agreement maxim principle of politeness.

3.2.3 Negation

Negative translation is a general approach for embedding classical logic into intuitionistic logic, typically by translating formulas to formulas which are classically equivalent but intuitionistically inequivalent.

Example 5.

You can't be serious.

你在搞笑吧。

By using the method of negation, negation is changed into affirmation by turning "not serious" into "joking", which not only express the original meaning clearly, but also conforms to the habit of the target language; At the same time, we chose the word "搞笑" which is more easily understood by the Chinese audience, a cultural rewriting is made, and Simone's humorous, open-minded and cheerful character is displayed to the fullest.

3.2.4 Diction and Conversion

Diction refers to choice of words. By diction, proper words and phrases will be chosen in translation on the basis of comprehensive understanding of the original words. Conversion means some parts of speech are changed during translation. Diction and conversion are creative translation methods when it is hard find an equivalent in the target language. “New” words could be produced during the translation process. Thus, some ingenious translation words of phatic communion could not only convey the meaning, but also speak out the implication in an extremely clever way.

Example 6

Sheila: I guess you're our new neighbors.

Beth Ann: I must apologize for my husband's language.

席拉：我想你就是我们的新邻居吧！

贝丝·安：抱歉，我丈夫出口成脏。

When Beth Ann moved to a new block, her husband was so excited that he couldn't help swearing. Beth Ann apologized to her new neighbor Sheila. As a new neighbor she just met, Beth Ann's apology follows tact Maxim. In subtitle translation, the idiom “出口成章” is changed to “出口成脏” by structure-borrowing.

Example 7.

Again with the crazy eyes, huh?

又用你的哈士奇眼睛瞪人 是吧？

This is a line Jade's ex-boyfriend said to her. This debauched woman named Jade has big water blue eyes, which are very similar to Husky's blue eyes. Here, the translator makes use of this bright spot to skillfully deal with “crazy eyes” as “Husky's eyes”. On the one hand, the translator catches the actress's facial features, and on the other hand, he also grasps the main character of Jade, which is quite crazy. Once the corresponding episode was broadcasted, it was immediately popular among hundreds of millions of viewers. Netizens praised the sentence for its excellent translation. Even later, everyone jokingly called the play jade “二哈” (the nickname of husky). On the basis of faithfulness to the original text, the translation can play an entertaining role in film and television and trigger the interaction between the translator and the audience, which can be called the extreme of subtitle translation.

Example 8

You seem, uh, energized.

你看上去容光焕发。

The line comes from Karl when he met Simone after Gym class. If the original sentence is translated into “你充满活力呀”，it doesn't affect the audience's understanding and the promotion of the plot. But the two characters have affairs respectively. “Energized” here indicts the secret relationship between Simone and Tommy who are 27 years younger than Simone. Although it was only a few bytes long, his facial expression could make the audience read out profound emotions beyond the language level.

4. CONCLUSION

It's important to keep up with the fashion in subtitle translation on phatic communion. This paper explores subtitle methods of and examines whether the subtitled phatic communion appropriately convey the illocutionary meaning of the source text in *Why Women Kill*. It's important to keep up with the fashion. According to different situations, in order to achieve the goal of complete information transmission, the translator could violate the politeness principle, but this kind of violation is limited and should be measured by the actual pragmatic meaning. In addition, the commerciality of film and television works requires translators to play a certain role in the subtitle translation activities to realize the commercial value of film and television series. The realization of the commercial value of film and television works is based on the reservation and transformation of the excellent value of the original.

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