

Analyzing the Translation Differences Between Official and Unofficial Subtitles of “Lady Bird” from a Feminist Translation Perspective

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Abstract:

With the development of cross-cultural communication, film subtitle translation has emerged not only as a tool for linguistic conversion but also as an important medium for cultural dissemination. The application of feminist perspectives in subtitle translation has gradually gained attention. “Lady bird”, as a feminist film, tells the coming-of-age story of a young girl named Christine. This paper uses feminist translation theory as a framework to comparatively analyze the official and unofficial Chinese subtitles of the film, Examining the influence of gender views on subtitle translation. The research examines the three primary feminist translation tactics suggested by Flotow and explores the impact of the translator’s gender identification on translating choices. The results indicate that feminist translation strategies can reinforce feminist ideas in subtitles and promote gender equality in film translation practices. This research provides a new perspective for gender studies in film translation.

Keywords: feminism; “Lady Bird”; subtitle translation.

1. Introduction

With the advancement of globalization, movies have transcended language and cultural barriers through subtitle translation to convey their ideas and values to a wider audience. Therefore, subtitle translation is of great significance in the international dissemination of film and television works. However, Conventional subtitle translation often overlooks the translator’s gender affiliation and fails to adequately express feminist concepts [1].

Directed by Greta Gerwig, “Lady Bird” follows the

life of Christine, a youngster who goes through adolescence from defiance to acceptance. With its realistic and nuanced narrative style, the film profoundly portrays the mother-daughter relationship, female independence consciousness, and self-exploration during adolescence. It has garnered 5 Oscar nominations. This distinctly feminist film not only reflects the issue of modern women’s identity, but also sparks extensive discussions about gender, family, and social expectations.

This study attempts to explore the role and influence

of gender perspective in subtitle translation by comparing and analyzing the original subtitle translation of the movie “Lady Bird” and the translation of the subtitle group composed of female translators. Specifically, this study will use the feminist translation strategy proposed by Flotow through case analysis to examine the reasons behind the discrepancies in translation between the two language versions, analyze how gender factors affect the translator’s translation decisions, and explore the current status of feminist film subtitle translation, and verify the importance of feminist translation theory in film subtitle translation.

The goal of this study is to fill the gap in the study of translator subjectivity from a gender perspective, provide theoretical support and methodological reference for future film and television translation practice, and promote feminist films to accurately express female power.

2. Feminist Translation and Film Subtitle Translation

2.1 Feminist Theory and Its Development

From the end of the 19th century to the 1960s, the first wave of feminism emerged, when more and more women pursued women’s equal rights and political awareness. Beauvoir pointed out that men set themselves up as subjects, objectified women, and made women subordinate to themselves, while women should obtain equal rights with men, realize their subjectivity, and move towards independence and freedom. This call not only demonstrates the power of women, but also promotes the development of feminism in the process of continuous self-improvement and correction. However, it is worth thinking critically that the appeal of the first wave of feminism mainly came from white middle-class women, ignoring the needs of working class and women of color. This appeal for a single gender identity failed to cover women of different social classes and races, leading to further reflection on diversity and intersectionality within feminism.

The ideological system of Western feminism is not complete and rigorous. In the process of continuous self-improvement, the internal differences and disputes of feminism have gradually emerged. From the 1960s to the 1980s, the second wave of feminism emerged [2]. However, this theory raises new questions: Can all women identify with this writing style? Is Cixous’s theory more applicable to women in Western cultural backgrounds? In the context of globalization, how can “women’s writing” ensure that it can convey the experiences and voices of women in different cultures? These questions highlight the

challenges of cultural diversity within feminism.

In the 1980s, the third wave of feminism began, which emphasized integration and coexistence and advocated diversity. Postmodern feminism began to abandon the principle of equal treatment for both genders advocated by traditional feminism and instead emphasized and affirmed differences between the sexes [3]. This theoretical shift provides theoretical support for diverse female identities, especially when responding to individuals who do not belong to the binary gender framework. However, while emphasizing differences, is it possible to ignore the core concern of structural inequality? Over-promoting differences may lead to a new essentialist tendency? Therefore, although postmodern feminism provides a new perspective on gender diversity, its collective struggle for gender equality may bring new challenges.

The word “feminism” was introduced in China in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and early discussions on feminism were closely intertwined with nationalism and social reform [4]. In recent decades, with the global feminist movement and social changes, feminism has revived in China and reignited discussions on gender equality and women’s rights [5]. However, Chinese feminism also faces special challenges. In the global context, how to maintain its emancipatory and critical nature under the constraints of national policies, traditional culture and social reality is an issue worth discussing.

2.2 Movie Subtitle Translation

Movie subtitles refer to a form of text that appears at the bottom of the screen during the playback of a movie or video. It is used to convey information such as dialogue, narration, and scene descriptions in the movie. The use of subtitles does not fundamentally alter the visual and auditory elements (including music, language, and other sound effects) of the original film. What the subtitles cannot express or express insufficiently, the audience can get compensation from the original sound [6].

In the study of movie subtitle translation, researchers usually use a variety of methods to collect data to explore the effects and impacts of different translation strategies. Text comparative analysis is a common method. By comparing the original lines with different subtitle versions, researchers can identify strategies such as deletion, compensation, domestication, and alienation used in translation. This method reveals the challenges faced by translators when dealing with cultural differences and colloquial expressions.

In addition, case studies deeply analyze the subtitle translation process of a specific movie, especially the details of cross-cultural communication. This study technique

demonstrates that subtitles serve not just as a translational tool, but also as a conduit for ideas and culture. In the context of globalization, how to convey the cultural connotation of movies through subtitles has become a research focus.

response surveys are researchers who collect audience feedback to understand the effect of subtitle translation. Through questionnaires or interviews, researchers can evaluate the readability, emotional transmission, and audience understanding of the original work of subtitles. These feedback provide audience perspective support for the quality assessment of subtitle translation, which helps researchers measure the effectiveness of translation strategies.

At the same time, corpus analysis, as a quantitative research method, can reveal language patterns and common strategies in different subtitle translation versions by collecting a large number of movie subtitles for statistical analysis. This macro-analysis method can help researchers discover universal laws in translation practice.

In short, movie subtitle translation needs to accurately convey the content of the dialogue within a limited time and space, ensuring that the subtitles are concise, natural, and culturally adapted. Translators must not only consider the colloquialism and emotional expression of the dialogue, but also synchronize sound effects and non-verbal information to maintain consistency with the screen content. This necessitates that translators strike a balance between linguistic translation and cultural adaptation to enhance viewer comprehension and emotional engagement with the film.

2.3 Feminist Translation Views

In the 1970s, the combination of Western feminism and translation studies broke the traditional perspective of people's translation views and brought a huge impact on translation theory. Traditional language is dominated by men, and women are passive, oppressed, and invisible in such languages. With the American translation scholar André Lefevre proposing the concept of "cultural mediator", feminist translation theory has continued to expand and deepen, emphasizing that translation is a process of cultural re-creation. In her article "Gender and the Metaphors of Translation", Qian Bolin describes in detail the historical genealogy of gender metaphors in translation. Originality or originality is described by fatherhood and authority, while women are relegated to various inferior roles [7]. Domestic scholar Xu Lai summarized and explained Western feminist translation. Feminist translators hold that translation encompasses more than simply the exchange of ideas between cultures or the conveyance of

information between written works. As a political act, it seeks to change the original text's sexism and male-centeredness so that women can use the language to advocate for themselves [8].

2.4 Feminist Translation Strategies

Feminist translators get satisfaction from revisiting and reinterpreting texts via their distinct gender perspectives, so endorsing their textual manipulation [9]. The strategy of feminist translation was proposed by Canadian scholar Luise von Flotow. Her research "Translation and Gender: Translating in the "Era of Feminism." has made important contributions to the development of feminist translation theory, especially the most common feminist translation strategies she proposed: compensation, hijacking, and adding prefaces and footnote [10].

Compensation strategy refers to the process in which the translator adds or adjusts the content to compensate for the feminist elements in the original text that may be ignored, weakened, or difficult to convey due to cultural differences. Through compensation, the female voice in the translation is more fully reflected, thereby strengthening the feminist color of the translation.

Hijacking strategy refers to the process in which the translator highlights or reconstructs certain language and cultural elements to make feminist ideas more obvious during the translation process. Flotow believes that the hijacking strategy can make the feminist elements in the original text more prominent by deliberately selecting vocabulary and expressions, and even confront the gender bias that may exist in the original text.

Adding prefaces and footnotes refers to the process in which the translator supplements and illustrates the definitions of certain terms in the initial material by using prefaces and footnotes throughout the translation process, so that feminist ideas can be more deeply rooted in people's hearts.

3. Case Analysis

From the perspective of feminist translation strategies, this research utilizes the film „Lady Bird“ to compare the official Chinese subtitles with the Chinese translation provided by the TPG Subtitle Group. "Lady Bird" is a 93-minute film directed by Greta Gerwig. It tells the story of the growth of a young girl, Christine, from rebellion to maturity. The themes include mother-daughter relationship, adolescent confusion, and female independence. The TPG Subtitle Group is a female subtitle team founded in 2022, focusing on translating female-themed works and interpreting them from a female perspective.

In the comparative study of the translation of "Lady

Bird”, this paper selects two key clips to analyze the differences in feminist translation strategies of different subtitle groups. The first clip is the school’s reaction to Lady Bird’s campaign posters with a bird’s head and a female body and a female head and a bird’s body. The second clip is Lady Bird’s lines when she mentions the wealthy community. These two clips involve the use of compensation strategies, adding prefaces and footnotes strategies, and hijacking strategies, respectively, and reveal how different subtitle versions deal with the transmission of female identity and cultural background.

3.1 Comparative Study of Compensation Strategies

Fragment 1 Background: The background of this line is that Lady Bird is preparing to run for the “Student Union President” campaign at school. She created an advertising piece illustrating a woman with a bird’s skull and a bird with a female head in order to convey her challenge to societal standards and her study of personal identity. However, this poster caused disgust or dissatisfaction among some classmates, leading them to discuss it.

Example 1:

-Some of the students were disturbed by your posters.

-It’s just a bird head on a lady body, or vice versa.

TPG Translation: -Some students don’t like your posters.

-It’s just a bird head on a lady body, or a woman’s head on a bird body.

Official Translation: -Some students don’t like your posters. -It’s just a bird head on a human body, or a human head on a bird body.

Analysis: “Just” is a word with an understatement tone, often used to indicate that something is not important or not worth making a fuss about. In the context of the film, Lady Bird created a billboard with a bird’s head and a female body, as well as a female head and a bird’s body, to campaign for „president.“. She hoped to express a challenge to social norms through this poster, which itself may easily cause disgust or discomfort to others. The TPG Monster Subtitle Group added the word “nothing” to make the tone of the whole sentence more relaxed and casual, and to have a nonchalant attitude, which seemed to subtly strengthen Lady Bird’s contempt and disdain for this reaction. This treatment can be seen as a compensation for the attitude of the female character, allowing the audience to better appreciate Lady Bird’s firm attitude towards self-expression as a woman. In contrast, the official translation did not add similar modal particles, „nothing but a bird’s head and a lady body, or a woman’s head on a bird’s body“ was the literal translation. The tone was more neutral and plain, and failed to highlight the independence

and firmness of the female character as the TPG Monster Subtitle Group’s translation.

3.2 Comparative Study on the Strategies of Adding Prefaces and Footnotes

Background of Clip 2: This scene occurs while Lady Bird and her mother are shopping for apparel at a thrift store. Lady Bird is choosing a dress, which she bought to please a rich friend she doesn’t know. This friend lives in the Fab 40s neighborhood, a community that symbolizes wealth and social status. On Thanksgiving Day, he will attend a party, and Lady Bird hopes to fit in and make a good impression in such social occasions. This scene highlights her sensitivity to social class and her attention to other people’s opinions, and also reflects her desire and pursuit of an ideal life. The overall background creates a discussion of identity and economic differences, enhancing the film’s profound portrayal of the challenges faced by young women as they grow up.

Example 1:

She lives in the Fab 40s.

TPG Translation: She lives in the legendary 40s neighborhood. (Note: “The Fab 40s refers to a residential area in the heart of East Sacramento, famous for its architectural beauty and community spirit. It is named after the number of 40 to 49 avenues it occupies.”)

Official Translation: She lives in the Fab 40s community. (No footnote)

Analysis: In “Lady Bird”, Lady Bird shows a strong yearning for the “Fab 40s” because this area represents the social status and economic prosperity she desires. By highlighting Lady Bird’s longing for a wealthy community, the film shows her sensitivity to class differences and her thinking about her own identity. TPG Monster translated “Fab 40s” into “Legendary 40s Neighborhood” and added footnotes to explain the cultural and social background of this place name in detail. This practice not only conveys the actual meaning of the place name, but also reveals the class symbolism it carries, helping the audience understand Lady Bird’s complex feelings about this area. The official subtitles translate “Fab 40s” into “Happy 40 Community” without providing any additional explanation. This translation retains the original place name, but lacks an explanation of the social and cultural meaning behind it, which may hinder the public’s full grasp of the symbolic significance of the geographical name in the film.

3.3 Comparative Study of Hijacking Strategies

Background of Clip 3: Same as Clip 1.

Example 1:

Some of the students were disturbed by your posters. It's just a bird head on a lady body, or vice versa.

TPG Translation: Some students don't like your posters. It's just a bird head on a woman's body, or a woman's head on a bird's body.

Official Translation: It's just a bird head on a human body, or a human head on a bird's body.

Analysis: The TPG Monster Subtitle Group chose to translate “lady body” as “female body” instead of “human body”, which further emphasized the gender characteristic of “female”. This translation choice can be seen as a manifestation of a “hijacking strategy”. By highlighting the word “female”, the subtitle group strengthened the focus on the female body and its cultural symbolic meaning, making the feminist elements in the film more obvious. In contrast, the official translation used the more neutral “human body”, weakening the gender characteristics and making gender awareness diluted in the translation. This translation strategy emphasizes the focus on the self-definition and cultural expression of female identity, which is in line with the goal of making female voices and identities more visible in feminist translation.

4. Conclusion

Through a comparative analysis of two Chinese subtitle versions of the film “Lady Bird”, this study found that feminist translation strategies can more realistically and effectively convey feminist ideas and promote the practice of gender equality in film translation. This outcome not only substantiates the practical significance of feminist theory of translation in feminist cinema, but also provides new perspectives and methodological support for future film and television translation practices. This study also reveals translation choices which are significantly impacted by the translator’s gender identification, filling the gap

in regard to the research on gender viewpoints in subtitling translation. Future research can further refine the operation of relevant translation strategies and explore the role of gender perspective in more types of film and television works to promote a wider range of gender equality practices.

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