Contextual Study of Japanese Film and Television Subtitle Translation from the Perspective of Relevance Theory: A Case Study of the Movie Love Letter

Yuxuan Tian

Department of Japanese, Nanjing University, Nanjing, China

Corresponding author: 221108120@smail.nju.edu.cn

Abstract:

In the context of the increasingly close exchanges between countries, audiovisual works have gradually become one of the mediums for cultural exchange between nations, posing higher demands on subtitle translation. As a theory of verbal communication, association theory has brought a new perspective to the study of translation and various other fields in recent years. Domestic research in this area has yet to form a comprehensive and systematic theory, lacking a certain degree of professionalism. Based on the main viewpoints of relevance theory, this study selects the Japanese film *Love Letter* as the research subject. The article's main body adopts a literature analysis method, outlining translation principles such as maximum relevance and optimal relevance and applying a case study method to analyze the impact of translation methods on communicative effectiveness under semantic significance, cultural relevance, and situational relevance. The research indicates that relevance theory serves as an effective principle for guiding subtitle translation; translators need to fully understand the source context and appropriately adjust the subtitle content in conjunction with the target context, minimizing changes to the source language while ensuring that the target language audience fully comprehends the plot to achieve optimal relevance. It is hoped that this study can contribute to enriching related research in subtitle translation.

Keywords: Relevance Theory; *Love Letters;* Subtitle Translation; Cognitive Context.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Significance

With the rapid development of the Internet era, communication between different countries has become increasingly frequent. As the mainstream medium of cultural dissemination, audiovisual works have become an important channel for people in various countries to understand other nations. Numerous foreign audiovisual works are being introduced domestically and greatly loved by the people. However, due to barriers in cultural exchange, it is difficult for individuals to fully comprehend the connotations of foreign films, so subtitle translation has emerged. Excellent subtitle translation can help viewers better understand the plot and enhance the public's interest in learning foreign languages, promoting the dissemination and development of culture.

Nevertheless, due to differences in audience cognition and limitations of subtitle translation, many subtitle translations cannot convey the intended information of films understandably within a limited time and space, resulting in a significant discount in disseminating audiovisual content. However, current research indicates that the field of subtitle translation in China still lacks systematic theoretical support, standardized technical guidance, and a certain level of professionalism[1]. Additionally, domestic research primarily focuses on literary works and English film translation, with relatively few studies on subtitle translation of Japanese films. Against this backdrop, the author believes that researching the subtitle translation of Japanese films can further draw the public's attention to subtitle translation, enrich research related to Japanese audiovisual translation, and promote the development of subtitle translation.

1.2 Research Methods and Objectives

By adopting the perspective of Relevance Theory, this study selects the Japanese film *Love Letter* as the research object. Context analysis delves into semantic relevance, cultural relevance, and situational relevance based on the specific content of the film's subtitles. The study aims to evaluate the translation methods employed by translators.

It intends to demonstrate that relevance theory can serve as an effective guideline for subtitle translation by analyzing the Chinese-translated subtitles of the film *Love Letter*. It hopes to enrich the field of research on Japanese film and television subtitle translation and contribute to the development of subtitle translation.

2. Subtitle Translation and Correlation Theory

2.1 Subtitle Translation

In linguistics, subtitles can be divided into two categories: intralingual subtitles and interlingual subtitles. The latter, commonly referred to as subtitle translation, involves overlaying the dialogue between characters and necessary visual information in the original language with text at the bottom of the screen while maintaining the original audio[2]. Research on audiovisual translation originated in the West, where Western European scholars have been at the forefront of this field. In China, studies related to subtitle translation began after 2000, with early research focusing primarily on subtitle translation characteristics and its methods. In audiovisual language, dialogue between characters is predominant, characterized by colloquial features and occasional lack of word-choice precision [3]. Given the wide coverage of audiovisual subtitle translation, translators must render the source language into content familiar to the target language audience, appealing to refined and popular tastes. Furthermore, due to limitations of time and space, subtitle translation must convey a large amount of information in concise and clear sentences while also synchronizing the text content with the dialogue, actions, and visuals of the characters, placing high demands on the translators' skills.

2.2 Relevance Theory

Sperber and Wilson proposed in their book *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* that relevance theory is a cognitive theory of language communication used to explain the process of explicit-inferential communication[4]. Explicit behavior is a process of indication, where the speaker "clearly indicates the intention of expressing certain information clearly," while inference is when the listener infers the potential intent based on the explicit content.

As one of the most influenced research areas by relevance theory, translation focuses on language activities at its core and cultural exchange interactions as its purpose. Translation study requires an analysis of human brain mechanisms rather than just studying texts[5]. Relevance theory has provided a theoretical framework to reveal the nature of translation and guide its practical activities. It suggests that inferring contextual implications through reasoning can achieve optimal contextual effects and communication success by finding the best connection between a speaker's discourse and context[6]. In 1991, Ernst-August Gutt first proposed the theory of relevance translation based on relevance theory[7], mainly used to describe the cognitive processes of both parties in communication. Chinese scholars Zhanxi Li and Ziran He believe that relevance translation theory consists of two major principles: cognitive and communicative principles, corresponding to maximal relevance and optimal relevance, respectively[8]. Maximal relevance often adopts a literal translation approach, where the listener can identify the communicative intent with minimal cognitive effort. On the other hand, optimal relevance requires individuals to invest a certain amount of mental effort in analyzing discourse for effective understanding.

2.3 Dynamic Cognitive Context

The theory of relevance posits that "cognitive context" is not the external environment in which the communicators are situated but rather a part of the assumptions about the world held by the communicators. Chinese scholar Jianming Lu pointed out that on a macro level, "context" can be further divided into "situational context" and "cultural context"; on a micro level of word selection and usage, "context" can be further divided into "semantic background of word usage" or "semantic background"[9]. The dynamic analysis of language research will inevitably involve "situational context," "cultural context," or "semantic background," with its important theoretical support stemming from the relevance theory in cognitive linguistics.

2.4 The Application of Relevance Theory in Subtitle Translation

The application of relevance theory in film and television subtitles translation has become a major research trend in the future. Subtitle translation aims to achieve the best relevance. Thus, translators need to accurately understand the intentions of the source language film and evaluate the cognitive environment of the target language audience while upholding the principle of best relevance. Before 2012, domestic scholars mainly focused on relevance theory and film and television translation content richness. Still, they later shifted the focus toward the combination of relevance theory and subtitle translation. In 2017, based on the principles of cognitive relevance and communicative relevance, Li Huang conducted a detailed analysis of the characteristics of Japanese film and television subtitles translation in *Characteristics Analysis of Japanese Film and Television Subtitle Translation Based on Relevance Theory* from three aspects: cognitive environment, new and old information and the importance of informa-

tion[10]. Bowen Xue compared and analyzed the subtitles of the Japanese drama *99.9 Criminal Professional Lawyer*, translated by YYeTs and FIX subtitle groups, and conducted a textual analysis based on relevance theory[3]. Subtitle translation emphasizes reflecting the original style of the work, portraying the personalities of key characters, and ensuring the reliability of communication. As a communicative activity, subtitle translation also has relevance; it seeks the "best relevance" between the original author's communicative intent and the expectations of the target language readers[11]. Influenced by the translator's professional abilities, cognitive conditions, and personality, each translator's understanding and expression of the original text may vary, resulting in various word choices and language styles in translations. However, the common goal is to discover and present the best relevance to the audience. Therefore, when translating cultural terms or content involving cultural backgrounds, translators should first fully understand the original text to uncover implicit intentions[1], then combine personal styles to choose appropriate vocabulary for expression, ensuring successful communication while creating the best relevance.

In conclusion, relevance theory broadly describes the process of dialogue between communicators based on cognitive reasoning. When translating film and television subtitles, translators should provide information with the best relevance based on cognitive context, guiding the audience to achieve sufficient contextual effects with minimal cognitive effort[12].

3. Analysis of Chinese Translation of Love Letter Subtitles from the Perspective of Relevance Theory

The film *Love Letter* was introduced to mainland China in 1999 and re-released in 2021, garnering widespread popularity among the public and leaving a significant mark in the Japanese and global film industry. It contains a large number of Japanese aesthetic elements and unique implicit expressions. As a classic text in Shunji Iwai's youth romance films, *Love Letter* showcases Japanese film tradition's warm and tender style traits and adds a different connotation to the love story[13]. The prose-like narrative, delicate and beautiful visual style, and profound content demonstrate film aesthetic art's unique, empathetic qualities.

As a Japanese film, *Love Letter* has a specific social context. In contemporary society, people often focus on their self-identity as reflected by others, neglecting the true pursuit of self. Films, as an important medium, portray the existential thoughts of individuals in real society, allowing individuals to achieve the goal of self-identity and self-construction through cinema. Although *Love Letter* tells a story of love memories in youth, its significance extends beyond the text to a deeper exploration and reflection of real society. The exploration of meaning under the combination of film and theory is not only the artistic value of the film but also a reflection of today's society, triggering profound self-reflection among the audience. However, certain terms and cultural references in Chinese lack appropriate equivalents, resulting in semantic omissions and difficulties in the audience's understanding. Moreover, there is relatively limited research on the film *Love Letter* in China, and studies in subtitle translation are even scarcer. Therefore, researching this topic holds certain value and significance.

3.1 Semantic-contextual relevance

In Chinese and Japanese, there are many homonyms with different meanings; although some have similar semantics, their usage varies greatly. Moreover, the meanings of the same vocabulary in different fields are very different, all aspects that translators should pay attention to during the translation process. Word selection is the foundation of successful translation. Each term has its surface meaning and implies connotations, emotional nuances, and other meanings.

E.g.1: これで　既成事実成立っちゅうことで

Translation: This is like cooking raw rice into cooked rice now.

When someone accidentally witnessed the act of Akiba Shigeru kissing Watanabe Hiroko, the words Akiba Shigeru said to Watanabe Hiroko. Previously, due to Hiroko's inability to let go of her deceased lover, she had never given a direct response to Akiba Shigeru's advances and questions about their relationship. Translating directly as "this has now become a fact" would seem too harsh and fail to reflect Hiroko's conflicting emotions and the ambiguity and subtlety of their relationship. Therefore, the translator employed a technique of "domestication" and translated it into a Chinese idiom "生米煮成熟饭 (Cooked rice with uncooked rice)," which means What has been done cannot be undone, echoing the earlier scene where their relationship was exposed, leaving no room for denial as well as clarifying the implied meaning and enhancing the coherence.

E.g.2:

渡边博子：うん　まあ　いろいろ

秋叶茂：いろいろって？

渡边博子：いろいろって ... いろいろ

Translation:

Watanabe Hiroko: Well, it's a long story.

Akiyoha Shigeru: What do you mean by "it's a long story"?

Watanabe Hiroko: When I say it's a long story, it means

it's a long story.

When Autumn Maoye asked Wakabayashi Hiroko why she was happy, the response given was, " いろいろ ." In Japanese daily conversation, " いろいろ " is a common and practical word, meaning "many" or "various," used to describe the diversity and breadth of things, situations or characteristics. If translated directly, it would not convey the intended meaning of the main character. Therefore, combining relevance theory, the translator chose an idiom familiar to Chinese audiences, translating it as a Chinese idiom " 说来话长 " which means "It's a long story." This four-character idiom can succinctly convey the author's informational and interactional intentions, achieving optimal relevance in the translation. Subsequent dialogues between the two characters are similarly translated as reflecting the complexity of the event, in line with Hiroko's slightly embarrassed mood when discussing the matter.

3.2 Cultural-contextual relevance

As the crystallization of national wisdom, the cultures of various countries all possess unique connotations. As an important medium of cultural exchange, film plays a significant role in helping audiences understand the cultures of other countries through subtitle translation. Therefore, when translating subtitles, translators should not only convey the semantic information of the film but also transmit its cultural implications, thereby creating the best possible connection by exploring the hidden communicative intentions of the content.

E.g.3: また　けったいなこと思いつく子やな　君は

Translation: Why do you come up with such whimsical things again?

In relational theory, the same vocabulary can have different symbolic connotations in different cognitive contexts. In Japanese, the term " け っ た い " means "strange," "eccentric," etc., and is commonly used to describe something or someone's behavior, state, or appearance as peculiar or bizarre. In most cases, " けったい " tends to be used as a slightly derogatory term to point out that something deviates greatly from the norm or expected standards. However, in this context, Akiba Shigeru's intention is not to mock or criticize Wakabayashi Hiroko but to express astonishment and helplessness towards Hiroko sending letters to the deceased; hence, the translator rendered it as the idiom "wildly imaginative," effectively conveying the character's mental activities.

E.g.4: 法事の方は?

Translation: About the anniversary?

This is a conversation between Akiyoma and Hiroko Watanabe involving a specific term in Japanese, "houshi." "Houshi" is a religious ritual in Japan, especially those held to commemorate deceased loved ones. If translated literally as a "Buddhist event," it would be difficult to convey its meaning to domestic audiences. Therefore, the translator utilizes the translation technique of "foreignization" to replace words lacking reference or with cultural conflicts in the target language context, translating it into the well-known term "anniversary" for Chinese audiences. This not only conforms to the cognitive context of the audience but also naturally provides relevant information for the protagonist of the subplot, the deceased Jun Fujii (male), enabling the audience to understand the progression of the plot more smoothly and obtain sufficient contextual effects.

E.g.5: じゃあないもんな

Translation: There's nothing we can do about it.

" じゃあない " is an Osaka dialect because the dialect plays a role in magnifying the artistic effect of film and enriching the character image; therefore, for translators, translating dialects in films is a major challenge. If it is not specially treated, directly translated as "not", it will distort the meaning that the plot wants to express, causing a certain cultural loss and making the audience unable to appreciate the cultural connotation of the dialect. Therefore, translators adopt a popularized processing method, paraphrasing it as "can't do it," to the greatest extent to retain the characteristics of the source language while magnifying the contextual effect, providing the target audience with the most relevant semantic information.

3.3 Situational-contextual relevance

In the process of communication, individuals can derive information based on the surface meaning of words, but inference requires a combination of cognitive contexts to achieve. In the source language subtitles, there are often cases where the speaker's information is not expressed completely, or there are instances of speech omissions. Translators need to integrate specific scenarios in which the dialogue occurs, actively select the meaning most relevant to the speaker's intent based on the information provided by the speaker, and help the audience better understand the content of the film.

E.g.5: あの ... ちょっと忘れ物を

Translation: Excuse me, I'm going to take what I left behind.

Upon Akio's return after his student left, he coincidentally stumbled upon the scene, revealing his relationship with Hiroko. The speaker here omitted the latter part of the sentence, reflecting a sense of embarrassment and awkwardness. In Japanese culture, emphasis is placed on "scene," "situation," and "order" rather than the actual exchange of information, leading to an increase in naturally omitted elements, aligning with Japan's "ambiguous culture." Typically, when expressing desires, requests, suggestions,