

An Analysis of Subtitle Translation in Pixar Animated Films from the Perspective of Reception Aesthetics: A Case Study of “Inside Out” and “Coco”

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Abstract: *As one of the primary research strategies in contemporary translation studies, Reception Aesthetics Translation Theory primarily emphasizes the artistic and creative aspects that translation should possess in order to maintain the literary value and aesthetic appeal of the original text in the target language. The emergence of this theoretical perspective signifies that translators need to delve deeper into cultural nuances, rhetorical features, and creative techniques to create more artistic translation works. In this article, we will illustrate the impact of this theory on preserving the unique qualities and emotions of the original while also enhancing the audience's appreciation and understanding of these audiovisual works stemming from different cultural perspectives, using subtitle translations in Pixar animated films as examples.*

Keywords: *Reception Aesthetics, Subtitle Translation, English Animated Films*

1. Introduction

Translation, as a complex and rich art, has been continuously evolving over time. Reception aesthetics translation theory, in particular, emphasizes the artistic and creative aspects of translation. It views translation not merely as transferring information from one language to another but as a conveyance of culture and a reshaping of creativity. The aim is to present literary value and aesthetic beauty similar to the original text in the target language. The core idea of reception aesthetics theory is that translation should go beyond the literal meaning, striving to preserve the literary value emotions of the original work. This ensures that the audience can experience a similar aesthetic and emotional resonance in the target language. Within this theoretical framework, the animated films produced by Pixar, a subsidiary of the American Disney company, serve as intriguing and complex studies in cross-cultural expression.

2. The Overview of Reception Aesthetics

Reception aesthetics theory plays a prominent guiding role in film subtitle translation^[1]. The core concept of this theory originates from the Constance School in Germany in the 1960s, emphasizing the dominant role of the reader in the relationship between the author and the work. It underscores the reader's positivity, proactiveness, and creativity during the reading process. Additionally, reception aesthetics posits that the meaning, literary value, and historical development of literary works are tied to readers and their reading activities. This theory garnered support from Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser, literary history experts and aestheticians from Federal Germany. Their respective works, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory” and “The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response” are widely acknowledged as foundational to reception aesthetics. While Iser and Jauss both focus on text interpretation and understanding, their research fields and methods differ slightly: Iser concentrates more on the aesthetic response to literary works and the role of readers, while Jauss emphasizes the interconnection between text interpretation, history, and cultural context. In the following discussion, we will delve deeper into these viewpoints.

2.1 Jauss's Theory of “Horizon of Expectation”

Jauss points out that readers develop a horizon of expectation for a genre or pattern through continuous reading of previous texts^[2]. When readers confront a text, their unique expectations and perspectives influence their understanding and interpretation of the text. This implies that different

readers may have different reading experiences due to their distinct backgrounds, experiences, and emotions. As the classic saying goes, “A thousand readers, a thousand Hamlets.” It highlights the diverse personal perspectives and emotional connections of each reader, leading to distinct interpretations and feelings about the same literary work. Furthermore, Jauss particularly emphasizes the historical background in the process of understanding, asserting that readers’ comprehension is influenced and constrained by the historical and cultural environment they inhabit.

2.2 Iser’s “Implied Reader” and Aesthetic Response Theory

To further expand the micro-level research within reception aesthetics, Iser, building upon Jauss’s foundation, introduced the new concept of the “implied reader”—where the author doesn’t explicitly define any target reader, but rather, readers construct a new individual based on their own perceptions during the reading process. “The work itself evidently cannot be equated with the text or with the concretizations but must be located somewhere between them.”^[3] The implied reader actively engages with the text during reading, filling gaps, interpreting ambiguities, and ultimately attributing meaning to literary works. Aesthetic response theory emphasizes how literary works evoke readers’ emotions, imagination, and cognitive processes, and how individual aesthetic responses shape their understanding of literary works. According to this theory, the meaning and value of literary works are relative to each reader. Both of these theories underscore the openness and interactivity of literary works, where different works shape distinct implied readers and aesthetic viewpoints, leading to diverse interpretations and reactions.

3. Characteristics of Animated Film Subtitle Translation

As a multimedia form that encompasses various elements, film subtitle translation integrates literature, drama, music, visual arts, and more. It vividly reflects cultural characteristics on the screen in the most dynamic and intuitive way. It holds high aesthetic value and societal significance. Subtitle translation for animated films, as an emerging practice, not only needs to consider the demands of the target age group, ensuring the story is effectively conveyed in a new language but also bears the responsibility of promoting cross-cultural communication, attracting increasing interest from translation scholars globally.

3.1 Simplification

Due to the constraints of time and space in subtitle translation, translators need to focus on conveying the core information of the original text, ensuring the audience understands the film’s plot, dialogues, and emotions to the maximum extent. Therefore, translators often eliminate redundant or repetitive parts from the original text, using the most concise language to convey the emotions between characters. Simplified subtitle translation not only enhances audience understanding and entertainment value, making the film more engaging, but also aids in making the film easily comprehensible while preserving cultural elements and emotions. Here are examples from two movies to illustrate this point.

Example 1: “It kind of goes all over the place, but there is a station in Imagination Land.”

Translation: It seems to be running around, but in fact, I know there is a station in Fantasyland.

“Imagination Land” is translated as “Fantasyland”, vividly conveying the meaning of the original text. “Fantasy” represents the creativity and imagination within the mind, while “Land” emphasizes the joyful and fun nature of this place, aligning with the target audience of the film “Inside Out”. This simplified translation helps the audience understand and enjoy the film more easily while retaining the core concept of the original.

Example 2: “We are taking the Train of Thought.”

Translation: We can certainly follow the path of ideas.

“Train of Thought” is translated as “the path of ideas”. “Ideas” represents the thought process within the mind, while “the path” helps emphasize the coherence and continuity of this process, likening a series of thoughts to a train running on tracks. This translation assists the audience in comprehending and associating with the thought process within the mind, beyond a literal translation of the original text.

Example 3: “Welcome back to the Land of the Dead.”

Translation: Welcome back to the Realm of Spirits.

“the Land of the Dead” is translated as “the Realm of Spirits”, directly conveying that this place is related to the deceased. This helps the audience better understand the plot and theme without requiring too much explanation or background knowledge. This concise translation contributes to a deeper immersion of the audience in the story of the film “Coco”.

3.2 Practicality

In the previous discussion, we emphasized the concise features of subtitle translation. Simultaneously, we must consider the characteristics of everyday language in subtitle translation — maintaining a natural, colloquial style that aligns with the habits of the target audience. This style typically employs expressions related to daily language and culture, making it easier for the audience to emotionally connect with the plot and characters of the film or TV show. This translation aims to enhance audience understanding and familiarity while retaining the core meaning of the original text. It may include colloquial phrases, slang, authentic expressions, and references specific to a culture, conveying cultural elements and emotions. This style is suitable for emotionally rich, humorous, or everyday dialogue scenarios, helping the audience better immerse themselves in the world of the story.

Example 1: “I look like a lot of people.”

Translation: I am nothing special.

When Joy and Sadness first encounter Bing Bong, he self-deprecatingly remarks about his ordinary appearance, saying he is a face in the crowd. The translation, “nothing special” expresses this in a more daily language, as if he is a representative of the common faces in Riley’s mental world. This translation adds humor and makes it easier for the audience to understand his emotions.

Example 2: “Pick a plotline.”

Translation: I am totally speechless about the dream plot.

When Joy and Sadness try to wake up Riley’s Dream Productions, Fear sarcastically comments on the chaotic scene. To make the expression more accessible, the line is translated as “totally speechless”, emphasizing the incredulous feeling of Fear. This translation is more easily understood by the audience and adds humor, aligning with the comedic style of the animated film.

Example 3: “Well, since it’s a family matter.”

Translation: So it is a family conflict, huh?

When Miguel’s family attempts to send him back to the real world, they discover that Mama Imenda’s inability to cross the petal bridge is due to Miguel taking her photo from the ofrenda. Faced with this chaotic situation, the line “since it is a family matter” implies that this matter is related to their family members. To convey the meaning of the original text in a more down-to-earth manner, the Chinese translation uses “family conflict” which is more relatable and easily understood by the audience, maintaining the coherence of the plot without losing the essence of the original.

4. Analyzing Subtitle Translation of Two Films from the Perspective of Aesthetic Reception Theory

Through thoughtful subtitle translation, the audience can immerse more deeply into the cultural and emotional world of the film, enhancing their understanding and emotional resonance with the story. This is in line with the aesthetic reception theory in translation, emphasizing the conveyance of cultural elements to foster a closer connection between the audience and the story, thereby elevating the audience’s artistic experience. Subtitle translation plays a crucial role in this aspect, using clever language choices and cultural conveyance to enable the audience to fully comprehend and appreciate the profound meanings and emotions of the film.

4.1 Cultural Exchange Under the Horizon of Expectations

Aesthetic reception theory in translation emphasizes the consideration of the audience’s expectations in artistic creation. Especially in film subtitle translation, accurate conveyance of meaning is crucial. Therefore, subtitle translators not only translate the source language into the target language,

but also shoulder the mission of transmitting the source culture and engaging in cross-cultural communication tasks^[4]. To ensure that the audience can deeply understand and appreciate the cultural background conveyed by the story and to promote the dissemination and development of cross-cultural communication, the ability of the audience to fully understand exotic cultural elements through subtitle translation becomes crucial.

Example 1: In the film “Inside Out”, when Joy and Sadness enter the Imagination Land, they find Riley’s “imaginary boyfriend”. The original dialogue is “I will die for Riley.” And the translation renders it as “I am willing to go through fire and water for Riley”. This paraphrasing not only conveys the original concept but also allows Chinese viewers to deeply appreciate the cleverness of the word “die”. This method aligns with the aesthetic reception theory in translation, emphasizing the conveyance of cultural elements and fostering a closer integration of the audience into the emotional and cultural world of the film.

Example 2: In the movie “Coco”, the Day of the Dead is a significant cultural symbol in Mexico. The subtitle translation translates “the Day of the Dead” as “Festival for remembering those who have died”, aiding the audience in better understanding the importance of this traditional celebration. This translation not only preserves the cultural elements of the original text but also makes it easier for the audience to comprehend and resonate. This aligns with the translation theory of the horizon of expectations, advocating for the conveyance of cultural elements.

4.2 Aesthetic Response and Emotional Expression

Aesthetic reception theory in translation emphasizes the importance of conveying emotions and maintaining the literary and emotional depth of the original text in subtitle translation. In animated films, the artistic style and emotional expression of characters are crucial elements. Through the application of aesthetic reception theory in translation, audiences can better appreciate the artistic value of the original work and gain a deeper understanding and experience of the characters’ emotions. This translation approach helps audiences immerse more fully into the film’s world, establish a closer connection with the characters, and appreciate the emotional depth of the characters.

Example 1: In the film “Inside Out”, the five emotional elements Joy, Sadness, Anger, Disgust, and Fear are translated as Le Le, You You, Nu Nu, Yan Yan, and Pa Pa. This translation, combined with aesthetic reception theory, is reasonable. As core characters, the translation first responds to popular aesthetics; these names are easy to pronounce, distinct, and easily recognizable. Secondly, it conveys their emotional characteristics by translating emotional elements into names with similar sounds, such as “Le Le” (Joy) and “You You” (Sadness), making it easier for the audience to identify these emotions and resonate emotionally with the protagonist’s inner world. Lastly, unlike text reading, even if some content does not appear in the subtitles, audiences can capture it through sound and visuals^[5]. Different emotional characters can be represented by specific colors, such as Sadness in blue and Anger in red. Subtitle translation responds to aesthetic requirements, retaining these color symbols, allowing audiences to associate them immediately while reading the subtitles, aiding better understanding of the presence of emotional elements.

Moreover, aesthetic reception theory in translation also encourages maintaining the literary and emotional depth of the original work in subtitle translation. This helps audiences better understand the literary and artistic value of the original, enhancing their artistic experience of the film.

Example 2: In the film “Coco”, the theme song “Remember Me” is translated to “Memorize me”, which, in fact, reflects another aspect of the emotional depth of this work. Miguel, in order to prompt his grandmother to remember his father in time, sings with his guitar, and the act of “memorizing” is not just about recalling a vague impression of the father but carries the cherished memories of childhood. Through the nostalgic and poignant melody, “Memorize me” directly conveys the theme of the song and even the entire movie. This translation not only aids audiences in better understanding the core theme of the film, making it easier for them to resonate with the emotions expressed in the song but also highlights the importance of emotional expression and literary depth. Aligned with the aesthetic reception theory, this translation approach provides a more profound viewing experience, enabling audiences to better understand and appreciate the musical and emotional elements of the film.

4.3 Human-Centric Theme Features

Aesthetic reception theory in translation emphasizes maintaining literary qualities and profound

emotions. As mentioned earlier, through emotional expression, growth, and emotional resonance, audiences gain a deeper understanding of the emotions and growth portrayed in the film. In both of them, the subtitle translations consistently reflect the human-centric theme features. The former focuses on emotions, growth, and exploration of the inner world. It bases the emotional changes and confusion experienced by the protagonist Riley due to moving as the foundation, achieving her growth in the journey of life. The latter revolves around family, affection, and memories, starting with young Miguel's desire to become a famous guitar player like his great-grandfather, revealing the musical secrets behind the family.

In these two films, subtitle translation needs to approach the perspective of the two child protagonists' growth, helping the audience delve into the humanistic and emotional world presented by the movies, fostering a more immersive and emotionally resonant experience. This is especially important in contexts emphasizing essential themes such as human emotions, growth, and family.

Example 1: "Look at you, aren't you a little bundle of joy?"

Translation: Look, you're truly a happy little angel.

In the father's opening line to Riley, not only conveys the joy and excitement of becoming a father for the first time but also carries a touch of humor. The translation, "Look, you're truly a happy little angel", from a human-centric perspective, successfully preserves the positive tone of the compliment. Using "little angel" effectively conveys the essence of "bundle of joy", describing someone extremely cute and joyful. This helps the audience better understand the positive evaluation in the original text and fosters resonance.

Example 2: "Come on, I brought you a little offering."

Translation: Don't be like that, let's get a drink.

When Hector takes Miguel to see Chicharrón to borrow his guitar, he deliberately brings two cups of wine as a small gift. Although the original text uses "a little offering" essentially implying a gift, the subtitle translation adapts it to the film's context, rendering it as "get a drink". This translation considers the portrayal of the film's plot and character relationships, emphasizing Hector's warmth and friendliness. It also aligns more closely with the audience's life experience, sparking their imagination.

5. Conclusion

As representatives of cross-cultural communication, animated films showcase the characteristics of diverse cultures and rich emotions. Subtitle translation is not merely a mechanical conveyance of information but a transmission of culture and emotions. The application of aesthetic reception theory is not solely for translation accuracy but also to enhance the audience's cultural experience and emotional resonance. This is crucial for the successful dissemination of cross-cultural cinematic works and a profound understanding by the audience. The subtitle translation of Pixar animated films, guided by aesthetic reception theory, highlights the artistry and creativity of translation, better preserving the original work's qualities and emotions. It enables the audience to appreciate and understand these films' beauty across cultures. This is not only an application of translation theory but also a contribution to cultural media, allowing global audiences to share and experience a vibrant array of cultural perspectives. In the future, we look forward to more innovation from translators in this field, fostering the dissemination and understanding of outstanding cross-cultural works.

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