

# Translation of Discourse Marker *Okay* from the Perspective of Adaptation Theory

Meifang Pei<sup>1</sup>, Jintao Ma<sup>2</sup>, Fangyun Weng<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Shiyuan College of Nanning Normal University, Nanning, 530226, China

<sup>2</sup>Guilin University of Electronic Technology, Guilin, 541004, China

**Abstract:** Films are mainly comprised of dialogues in which discourse markers are commonly used to structure the interaction. The use of discourse markers in fabricated text can increase the naturalness of language. In order to recreate the naturalness and orality of the fictional dialogues, due attention should be paid to the translation of discourse markers. This paper takes the discourse marker *Okay* as an example and gives an analysis of the translation of the discourse marker *Okay* from the four angles of Adaptation Theory, including contextual correlates of adaptability, structural objects of adaptability, the dynamics of adaptability and the salience of the adaptation processes. Based on the analysis of the translation of *Okay*, it can be seen that in the process of choice-making, the translator makes dynamic adaptation with different degrees of salience to both the context and the structure so as to make appropriate choices and achieve successful language communication.

**Keywords:** Discourse Marker, *Okay*, Translation, Adaptation Theory

## 1. Introduction

Discourse markers are commonly used in daily conversations. There are different perspectives on the definitions and classifications of discourse markers. In the west, Schiffrrin [1] defines discourse markers as sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk, including exclamations such as *well* and *why*, conjunctions such as *and* and *because*, time and orientation designators such as *now* and *there*, verbs such as *see* and *say*, adverbs such as *anyway* and lexicalized clauses such as *y 'know* and *what I mean is*. Fraser [2] contends that discourse markers do not belong to a separate grammatical category, but come from conjunctions, adverbs and preposition phrases. He divides discourse markers into two main classes: messages relating markers and topic relating markers. In China, Ran [3] is among the earliest scholars who study discourse markers. He divides Chinese discourse markers into eight categories without giving a strict definition. Liu [4] gives a definition to Chinese discourse markers: a relatively closed functional category with a limited number of discourse markers. She divides them into non-lexical discourse markers and lexical discourse markers according to their structural forms. Xie [5] redefines discourse markers as expressions to mark discourse, derived from exclamations, conjunctions, adverbs, demonstrative pronouns, verbs, phrases and clauses.

With regard to the functions of discourse markers, most scholars agree that discourse markers have two of the three metafunctions of language proposed by Halliday [6] the textual function and the interpersonal function. Stman [7] believes that the textual function of discourse markers is to mark events and turn-taking, and the interpersonal function is the main function of discourse markers. Aijmer [8] points out that a discourse marker is used to attract the attention of the hearer when the speaker is about to switch topics or the conversation is interrupted. Xie [5] holds that discourse markers do not convey propositional meanings but have the textual function of organizing discourse and the interpersonal function of expressing mood, attitude and emotions.

Films are mainly comprised of dialogues in which discourse markers are commonly used to structure the interaction. The use of discourse markers in fabricated text can increase the naturalness of language. In order to reproduce the naturalness and orality of the source dialogues, due attention should be paid to the translation of discourse markers. This paper takes the discourse marker *Okay* as an example, which is used the most frequently in the English animated film *The Croods* and gives an analysis of the translation of the discourse marker *Okay* from the perspective of Adaptation Theory.

## 2. Adaptation Theory and Translation

Adaptation Theory was first put forward by Belgian scholar Jef Verschueren [9] in 1987. He [10] further developed Adaptation Theory into a coherent theoretical framework in 1999, providing a new perspective on language use. Language use is defined by Verschueren as “the continuous making of linguistic choices, consciously or unconsciously, for language-internal (i.e. structural) and/or language-external reasons”. Linguistic choices are made with various degrees of salience for the purpose of successful communication.

According to Adaptation Theory, language use can be described and explained from four angles of investigation: contextual correlates of adaptability, structural objects of adaptability, the dynamics of adaptability and the salience of the adaptation processes. First, contextual correlates of adaptability, as is seen from Figure 1, include language users, the mental world, the social world, the physical world, and the linguistic context. Second, structural objects of adaptability include structures at any level of organization and principles of structuring. Choice-making involves the selection of languages, codes, styles and utterance-building ingredients, etc.. Third, the dynamics of adaptability means the development of adaptation processes over time or the unfolding of adaptive processes in interaction. Language choice-making should be adaptive to both linguistic and contextual aspects. Fourth, the salience of the adaptation processes is the status of processes of meaning generation in relation to the cognitive apparatus. Not all linguistic choices are made equally consciously due to different levels of salience.

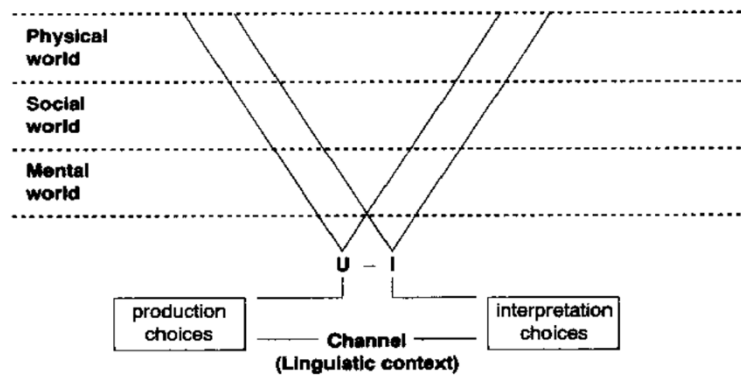


Figure 1: Contextual correlates of adaptability

As is described in Figure 2 below, the four angles are closely related to each other. The meaningful functioning of language use is seen as a dynamic process operating on context-structure relationships at various levels of salience. Context and structure are combined to define the locus of adaptation. Dynamics is defined as the processes of adaptation, dealing with the development of the context-structure relationship over time. Salience is the status of adaptation and the dynamic interadaptability of context and structure takes place with different degrees of salience in the language users’ minds. The four angles of investigation constitute focal points in a coherent pragmatic approach to language use.

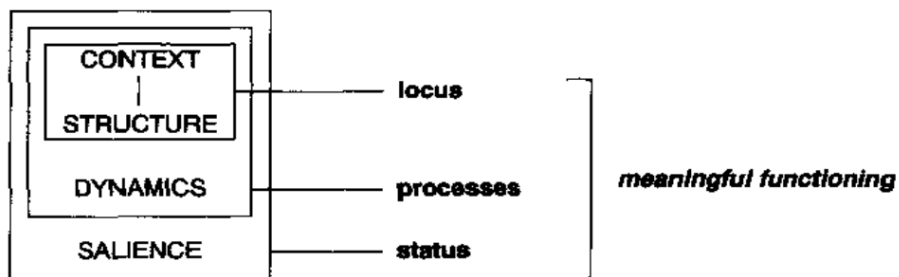


Figure 2: The structure of a pragmatic theory

In fact, many scholars such as Wilss [12], Liu [13] and Zhang [14] argue that translation is also a process of choice-making. Since translation involves two languages and cultures, translators need to make appropriate choices in the process of translation. All the choices made in translation are related to the needs of communication. In order to make the communication go smoothly, translators play dual

roles in the process of translation. On the one hand, the translator is an interpreter making interpretation choices in understanding the source text. On the other hand, the translator is an utterer making production choices in the target text. The process of making choices in translation exhibits various degrees of salience. Some choices are made very consciously while some are made completely unconsciously. As a result, translators should take into account the context and the structure, and adopt flexible translating strategies in making choices to make sense of the original meaning. In the process of choice-making, translators should make dynamic adaptation to both linguistic and contextual aspects, so as to make appropriate choices and achieve successful language communication.

Therefore, Adaptation Theory provides a useful perspective for the study of translation. Within its framework, translation can be viewed as a continuous process of language choice-making, with dynamic adaptation to both the context and the structure of the source language and the target language for the purpose of successful communication

### 3. Translation of Discourse Marker *Okay* from the Perspective of Adaptation Theory

This paper analyzes the discourse marker *Okay* and its different translations in the English animated film *The Croods* and the official English-Chinese dubbed version. The film tells a story about a prehistoric family of cavemen, the Croods, who are forced to leave their home to find a new home because of a disaster called "The End". In the English film, twelve discourse markers are used for 127 times, including *Okay, And, Well, So, Now, Yeah, Oh, You know, All right, I mean, Then* and *Look*. Among them, *Okay* is the most frequently used, with a frequency of 33 times. The translation of the discourse marker *Okay* will be analyzed from the perspective of Adaptation Theory, including four aspects: contextual adaptation, structural adaptation, dynamic adaptation and salient adaptation.

#### 3.1. Contextual Adaptation in Translation of Discourse Marker *Okay*

Verschueren [11] contends that contextual correlates of adaptability include communicative context and linguistic context. As for communicative context, there are four parts: language users, the mental world, the social world and the physical world. As for linguistic context, there are textual cohesion, intertextuality, and sequencing. In the process of dubbing translation, translators need to make adaptation to both the communicative context and the linguistic context of the target text while taking into account the pragmatic functions of the discourse marker *Okay* and the constraints of dubbing.

Let us take a look at an example in terms of communicative context.

Example 1: Guy: You're really heavy.  
Eep: Really? Thank you.  
(Guy and Eep fall down together)  
Grug: Hey, wait!  
Guy: **Okay**, she's up. We're good. I'm good.

In example 1, Guy helps Eep put on her new shoes but Eep can't stand well and falls down together with Guy. Eep's father Grug quickly splits them up. As is mentioned above, the discourse marker *Okay* can be used to demonstrate common understanding between the speaker and the listener, signifying approval, acceptance and confirmation. It is used by Guy as a response marker to mark his understanding of the nervous feeling of Grug and his efforts to calm down Grug. When Guy says *Okay*, he makes adaptation to Grug's mental world, that is, Grug is nervous about the intimate relationship between Guy and Eep.

In the dubbed translation, the discourse marker *Okay* is rendered as "take it easy" in Chinese instead of its literal meaning, which causes no obstacles for the target audience to understand the context but helps better facilitate the cross-cultural communication. The translator adapts the translation to the mental states of the utterer and the interpreter in source language, as well as the mental states of the target audience. In this way, the translation not only fully reproduces the pragmatic functions of *Okay* but also makes adaptation to the communicative context in the scene of film.

Let us take a look at an example in terms of communicative context.

Example 2: Grug: Get back here now! Get back here now!  
Grandma: Well, there goes our chance for survival.  
Thunk: And our log!  
Grug: **Okay!**

Thunk: Jumping doesn't help. I mean, just briefly, but it doesn't get any better!

In example 2, the Croods are faced with a lot of pointy rocks on their way to find a new home. The rocks block their way because they wear no shoes. At this time, Guy, although he is put in a log by Grug, is standing on the rocks with his shoes. Grug tries hard to walk on the pointy rocks to catch Guy but he has to give up because his feet are hurt by the rocks. And Guy is scared away. The discourse marker *Okay* is used to offer a link between two stages or phases of the conversation and it serves as a time-saving and effective way of managing the transition of conversations. In this example, Grug shifts the conversation from the stage of challenging the pointy rocks to catch Guy to the stage of giving up. Since the pragmatic function is simple in the source text, a literal translation is enough to reproduce the pragmatic meaning in the dubbed version. The translator's choice-making adapts to the linguistic context of both the source language and the target language so as to bridge the language barriers between two different languages.

### 3.2. Structural Adaptation in Translation of Discourse Marker *Okay*

According to Verschueren [11], communicative choices are made at all levels of linguistic structure, from sound feature and phoneme to discourse and beyond, including both "structures" and the principle of "structuring". In the society, choice of language can be determined by many factors, such as political forces, social conventions, and different sign systems, etc.. Verschueren [11] defines code as any distinguishable variant of a language, which ranges from different dialects to group-specific languages, resembling "register" in some way. Style is defined as variability along dimensions of formality and informality, from casual or colloquial speech to highly formal uses. For example:

Example 3: Grug: Croods, get down here!

Ugga: Grug, they're okay. Guy's with them.

Grug: Oh, Guy's with them. Oh, **Okay**.

Well, thank you, thank you for bringing me that interesting Guy update.

Ugga: Oh, **Okay**. I'm gonna go up.

Why don't you join us when you stop being a big drag.

In example 3, all the family members of the Croods stay with Guy up on a big rock except Grug and his wife Ugga. In the short conversation between Grug and Ugga, six discourse markers are used: 3 *Oh*, 2 *Okay* and 1 *Well*, which is a feature of natural oral language. The animated film *The Croods* are comprised of many fabricated dialogues which imitate the register of oral language. They are written to be spoken as if not written and discourse markers are frequently used to imitate the real spoken language. As a result, the language of film is informal and colloquial.

In order to recreate the naturalness and orality of the fictional dialogues, the translator has to adapt the translation to the code and style of film language. That is to say, the source language should be rendered into the target language in an informal and colloquial style, imitating the register of oral language. Since discourse markers are an important feature of natural oral language, due attention should be paid to the translation of discourse markers. In the Chinese dubbed version, all the six discourse markers are translated into informal and colloquial Chinese equivalent expressions, which indicates that the translator makes structural adaptation in terms of choice of language, code and style. In audiovisual translation, it's of great significance to make structural adaptation so as to guarantee the style of the target language in accordance with that of the source language.

### 3.3. Dynamic Adaptation in Translation of Discourse Marker *Okay*

The dynamics of adaptability copes with the development of adaptation processes over time. The choice-making of language adapts to both contextual and linguistic aspects. The dynamics of language use can be located to any aspect of context and structure. As for audiovisual translation, the contextual constraints have an influence on the linguistic choices of the translator in the process of choice-making. At the same time, the linguistic choices also have an impact on the context. The constantly changing interaction of context and structure affects the dynamic meaning generation in translation.

Example 4: Guy: I can help you, but we're going to have to make a few changes around here.

The log ride is over. Drop the log.

Now kick it away.

Farther.

Really?

Grug: **Okay**, smart Guy.

Now what?

In example 4, Guy agrees to help the Croods to walk through the pointy rocks as long as Grug drops the log. Grug is not willing to cooperate at first but has to do as Guy says in the end. After Grug finally kicks away the log, he uses the discourse marker *Okay* to signify his acceptance of Guy's requirements and his impatience. In addition, *Okay* also serves as a way of transition in the conversation, linking between the end of the stage of Grug's dropping the log and the start of a new stage of Guy's help. The conversation is a dynamic process of negotiations between Guy and Grug. The choice-making of *Okay* is adaptive to the context in the scene of the film.

In the process of dubbed translation, the translator has to make dynamic adaptation to both the context and the structure. As far as dubbed translation is concerned, it deals with multimedia characterized by image and sound. In this example, the the discourse marker *Okay* is translated into its literal meaning in Chinese, which is sufficient to adapt to the mental world of Grug with the help of the dubbing actor's emotion in voice. And the simple literal translation is also more coherent with the target linguistic tradition. Thus, dynamic adaptation to context and structure and is a pragmatic strategy for successful language communication.

### 3.4. Salient Adaptation in Translation of Discourse Marker *Okay*

Verschueren [11] holds that the salience of the adaptation processes is a function of the operation of the reflexive or metapragmatic awareness involved in language use. It deals with the status of processes of meaning generation in relation to the cognitive apparatus. All dynamic aspects of language use in terms of structure and context require cognitive processing to have any impact on linguistic behaviour. Due to different levels of salience in the processes of human mind, linguistic choices are not made equally consciously or purposefully. Some are made automatically but some are made with high motivation. The choice-making process is considered as a part of mental processes and takes place with different degrees of salience from completely consciousness to completely unconsciousness.

Example 5: Thunk: Jumping doesn't help.

I mean, just briefly, but it doesn't get any better!

**Okay.** Do not walk on your hands.

The hands do not help at all!

In example 5, The Croods, who have no shoes to wear, try to walk on the pointy rocks which hurt their feet badly. Thunk tries jumping and walking on his hands, but they don't help. The discourse marker *Okay* is used by Thunk, with a high degree of salience, to link between two stages of the conversation. It functions as an effective way of transition. With the use of *Okay*, Thunk shifts the conversation from jumping to walking on hands. He not only expresses confirmation that walking on hands is useless too but also gives advice to help other family members avoid getting hurt by walking on their hands. Here, *Okay* also serves as an effective controlling device to dominate the behavior of others.

In the dubbed text, the discourse marker *Okay* is rendered as "Listen" in Chinese, instead of the literal meaning. This indicates that the linguistic choice is made with completely consciousness, which shows a high degree of salience in the process of translation. The translator makes dynamic adaptation to both the context and structure, not only focusing on the discourse alone but also taking into account the image and sound. What's more, the translator is also conscious about the mental worlds of both language users and the target audience as well as the target linguistic tradition. With high motivation, the translator adapts the translation to the utterer's intention in the context of the film and the target linguistic tradition.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the translation of the discourse marker *Okay* from the four angles of Adaptation Theory, including contextual adaptation, structural adaptation, dynamic adaptation and salient adaptation. Based on the analysis of the translation of *Okay*, it can be seen that in the process of choice-making, the translator makes dynamic adaptation with different degrees of salience to both the context and the structure. In order to recreate the naturalness and orality of the fictional dialogues, the translator not only focuses on the discourse alone but also adapts the translation to the communicative context in the scene of film and the code and style of film language, taking into account the synchronization of image and sound. Due attention is paid to the translation of the discourse marker *Okay*, which helps better produce coherent conversations, make clear speakers' intentions, correctly conveying the pragmatic meaning of discourse and recreate the orality and naturalness of dubbed language.

However, this paper collects limited data from only one film. There is much room for improvement

in the diversity of the source of data. First, it's suggested that the analysis be conducted with a corpus-based methodology, which is more objective and scientific. Second, a corpus of English-Chinese dubbed films and a corpus of original Chinese films can be built for a contrastive analysis to examine the use of discourse markers so as to obtain more persuasive research findings.

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