

Inappropriate Translation of Rhetoric in Film and Television Drama Titles

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Abstract: *Over the past two decades, substantial progress has been made in the research on title rhetoric, with the primary focus on genres such as advertising and news discourse. However, the rhetorical study of film and television drama titles has remained underexplored. This paper takes the rhetoric of overseas film and television drama titles as its research subject, and critiques the inadequacies in their translations—specifically, the failure to achieve the intended persuasive appeal and the obscuration of key information conveyed in the source texts. Its objectives are threefold: first, to highlight the indispensability of rhetoric in film and television drama titles; second, to identify the existing issues in their translation; and third, to propose preliminary insights into the criteria for handling the rhetorical translation of such titles.*

Keywords: *Film and Television Drama Titles; Rhetoric; Translation Studies*

1. Introduction

A title serves as the “eye” of an article, through which readers can grasp the main idea of the text even before reading its content. Beyond revealing the article’s theme, a title often fulfills the function of “capturing attention at first glance”. Titles that are engaging, concise, and succinct are more likely to attract readers’ attention and entice them to click on and read the article than those that are broad and stereotypical. Due to the word limit imposed on titles, writers often make clever use of rhetorical devices in titles. This practice aims to convey multiple layers of meaning within a limited number of words or evoke emotional resonance among readers.

Previous studies have either focused on rhetorical devices at different levels in titles—such as rhetoric related to punctuation, phonetics, and lexis—to provide appreciative analyses or propose strategies for achieving optimal rhetorical effects; or explored the characteristics of titles across different text genres and the application of various rhetorical figures therein, so as to verify the extraordinary role of rhetorical devices in enhancing titles. It is evident that scholars have mostly concentrated on the various positive impacts brought by the proper use of rhetoric, while neglecting the increasingly prevalent phenomena of improper rhetoric use, over-rhetoric, exaggerated rhetoric, and the distortion of rhetoric during bilingual conversion.

This paper aims to criticize and analyze the inappropriate translation of rhetoric in film and television drama titles, propose that translators should adopt a cautious attitude when handling rhetorical devices in titles, and argue that translators should break free from the structural constraints of the original title while faithfully conveying its meaning. In doing so, the three core functions of the title can be realized.

2. Current Research

Domestic research on title rhetoric primarily takes news and advertisements as carriers, and conducts analyses of rhetorical effects from perspectives such as rhetorical devices, phonological rhetoric, and lexical refinement^[1]. Qian Shikuan^[2], Dong Yi^[3], and Liu Jinlong^[4] all take news titles as their research objects, exploring rhetorical devices, punctuation rhetoric, and communicative rhetoric respectively.

Qian Shikuan and Dong Yi list common rhetorical figures such as allusion, antithesis, pun, metaphor, personification, and rhetorical question. They analyze and illustrate the rhetorical effects of these figures in titles with specific examples, including achieving unexpected success, attracting attention, creating formal and phonological aesthetics, realizing the thematic effect of conveying profound meaning in concise language, avoiding dullness, and setting suspense. Qian Shikuan argues that the application of rhetorical figures can make news titles unconventional, and their role is of great significance.

In addition to the use of rhetorical devices, Dong Yi and Feng Ying^[5] hold that punctuation marks play an auxiliary role in news titles and exert special rhetorical effects. In particular, the use of colons can make the meaning of titles concise and forceful. Liu Jinlong also discusses communicative rhetoric, which is often overlooked. Different from rhetorical figures, communicative rhetoric is reflected in the aspect of language expression, such as the logical coherence of meaning conveyance and the balance and rigor of structure. In news titles, the use of specific tense expressions can enhance the sense of timeliness of news, thereby achieving rhetorical effects.

Wang Yingge^[6] takes academic paper titles as the research object and elaborates in detail on the classification, content composition, and rhetorical characteristics of academic paper titles. Li Shaodan^[7] keeps pace with the times by discussing the rhetorical features of WeChat text titles. Meanwhile, he explores the phenomenon of over-rhetoric in WeChat text titles, including over-exaggerated rhetoric, vulgar and obscure rhetoric, and coercive rhetoric, aiming to solve practical problems. Zhou Yongmo^[8] explores the standards for title translation, puts forward guiding proposals for translators' translation practice from the perspective of translation standards, and reminds translators to convey the three core functions of titles—including informative function, aesthetic function, and imperative function. At the same time, translators are advised to avoid problems such as misinterpreting the meaning of words literally and being constrained by the structural form of the original text.

Taking the translation of film and television drama titles as the genre, this study combines criticism and analysis to illustrate the problems existing in the rhetorical translation of film and television drama titles, mainly including the ambiguity and misinformation of information, and the failure to realize the most important imperative function of titles.

3. Case Analysis

The hit American TV drama *Why Women Kill*, which gained widespread popularity in 2019, tells the story of three women with distinct personalities living in different eras, whose lives—centered on marriage and relationships—unfold in the same mansion. Composed of three extremely simple words, the title adopts an interrogative structure. The words “Women” and “Kill” reveal the core theme of the title, as well as that of the drama itself: women as the main characters and female-perpetrated murder as the key plot element. The word “Why,” on the other hand, embodies the title’s fundamental proposition. On the surface, it seeks to explore the motives behind women’s acts of murder; in essence, it delves into more profound topics such as their living conditions and the choices they face.

This concise and condensed TV drama title exemplifies the skillful application of communicative rhetoric. However, in the translation process, to avoid verbosity and retain the conciseness characteristic of TV drama titles, the translator rendered it into four Chinese characters, literally “Lethal Woman”—while neglecting the rhetorical effects embedded in the original title. Although it also identifies the main characters of the drama, the term “Lethal” in Chinese is generally understood as “most severe,” “toxic,” or “fatal,” and fails to convey the connotation of “murder” as the word “Kill” does. The selection of such a broad and ambiguous term to modify the main characters is prone to ambiguity, leading to confusion and misunderstanding among audiences.

Beyond the literal meaning, the original English title maintains an objective and neutral stance, implying to the audience that the drama aims merely to explore the causes of the murders rather than to criticize or condemn. In contrast, the Chinese title tends to impose a preconceived negative impression—the four characters evoke more negative associations than positive ones. Therefore, it is undeniable that the translation of this drama’s title is a failure. On one hand, it obscures the informational connotation of the original title; on the other hand, it fails to fulfill the imperative function effectively—namely, the function of appealing to and attracting potential audiences.

The popular American TV drama *Modern Family*, which premiered in 2009 and ran for 11 seasons, depicts the daily lives of three closely related American families. Through the word “Family,” the English title reveals its core theme; meanwhile, the adjective “Modern” defines its conceptual focus, indicating to the audience that the stories of these families are set in the contemporary era. Their family structures reflect the characteristics of modern American families, allowing the drama to use these specific cases to illustrate the broader picture of contemporary American life. Similarly, the title of this TV drama does not employ other rhetorical devices, but rather achieves the goal of conveying meaning and emotion through simple word choice. However, when translating it into Chinese, the translator added the rhetorical figure of allusion to handle the word “Modern.”

The Chinese term “Modeng”, derived from Buddhism, acquired the meaning of “fashionable” in the 1920s. Nevertheless, there remains a certain discrepancy between “fashionable” and the original meaning of “Modern.” The Chinese title tends to evoke the image of a family that pursues fashion, rather than a new-style family with modern characteristics. From the perspective of informational function transmission, this translation method undoubtedly has flaws. From the perspective of the imperative function, the term “Modeng” was a popular expression in the 1930s, but it is rarely used by modern audiences. Using an outdated term to translate a TV drama title makes it difficult to arouse people’s desire to watch or curiosity. Additionally, this Chinese title duplicates the name of an earlier domestic TV drama, which causes unnecessary trouble for audiences when searching for the show’s source. Therefore, the Chinese translation of this drama’s title also has shortcomings.

4. Translation strategies

A translator’s in-depth comprehension of the source text constitutes the foundation for accurately conveying its rhetorical intent, which requires comprehensive and meticulous analysis through multiple methodologies. Translators should consult a wealth of reference materials, including the work’s background of creation, the content of the original text (if available), and the authorial intent. Taking the American TV series *The Big Bang Theory* as an example, prior to translation, the translator needs to understand that the show’s narrative background revolves around a group of scientific geniuses, whose lives are filled with scientific elements and whimsical ideas. Simultaneously, it is essential to research relevant scientific materials on the “Big Bang Theory” to grasp its significance and influence in the scientific field, as well as its symbolic meaning within the series. Only in this way can the translator accurately capture the connotation conveyed by the metaphorical rhetoric in the original title *The Big Bang Theory*—that the protagonists’ lives are as vibrant and full of infinite possibilities as the cosmic Big Bang.

Analyzing the cultural context of the work is equally crucial. Different cultural backgrounds endow words and expressions with distinct meanings and associative implications. When translating *Game of Thrones*, the translator must delve into Western medieval history and culture, including knowledge of chivalry, the feudal aristocratic system, and power struggles. For the original title *Game of Thrones*, the term “Thrones” is closely linked to power and rule in Western culture, while “Game” metaphorically embodies the cruelty and complexity of power contention, analogous to a game replete with rules and strategies. A thorough understanding of such cultural background knowledge enables the translator to accurately interpret the rhetorical intent of the original title and avoid misunderstandings arising from cultural differences.

Translators should also pay attention to the work’s target audience and communication objectives. Different audience groups vary in their understanding and acceptance of film and television works, so translators need to accurately convey the source text’s rhetorical intent based on the characteristics of the target audience. For instance, title translations of film and television works targeting adolescent audiences should be more concise, vivid, and dynamic to capture their attention; in contrast, translations for adult audiences can be more in-depth and connotative to meet their demand for thematic depth. For works disseminated in the international market, translators must also consider cultural differences across countries and regions, adopt appropriate translation strategies, and ensure that the rhetorical intent of the original title is understood and accepted by global audiences.

In the translation of film and television titles, translation techniques such as literal translation, free translation, and transliteration each have their applicable scenarios. Translators need to flexibly select them based on specific circumstances to achieve the optimal translation effect. Literal translation is a relatively common method. When the linguistic structure and cultural connotations of the original title can be directly corresponding in the target language without causing ambiguity, literal translation can retain the form and meaning of the original title and accurately convey the information of the source text. Take the American TV series *The Vampire Diaries* as an example, since “vampire” and “diaries” have direct corresponding words in Chinese, this literal translation can accurately convey the characteristics of the series—centering on vampire stories and unfolding the plot in the form of diaries.

However, when the cultural connotations or rhetorical devices of the original title are difficult to directly reflect in the target language, free translation is a better choice. Free translation can flexibly transform and adjust the original title according to the cultural background and expression habits of the target language to convey its deep meaning and rhetorical effects. For instance, the film *Inception*, if literally translated as “beginning”, fails to convey the complex plot of interwoven dreams and reality as

well as the mysterious atmosphere in the film. In contrast, the free translation adopts rhetorical devices of metaphor and compound words. By combining “Daomeng”, a behavior full of mystery and adventure with the abstract concept of “Kongjian”, meaning “space”), it vividly conveys the core content of the film to the audience and successfully captures their attention.

When selecting translation techniques, translators also need to consider factors such as the conciseness, attractiveness, and cultural adaptability of the title. A concise and clear title is easier for the audience to remember and disseminate, while an attractive title can stimulate the audience’s desire to watch. At the same time, it is necessary to ensure that the translated title conforms to the cultural background of the target language and the audience’s acceptance habits, avoiding cultural conflicts or inappropriate expressions that may affect the audience’s understanding and acceptance. For example, when translating titles involving specific cultural connotations such as religion and historical allusions, special attention should be paid to cultural adaptability. Appropriate annotations or explanatory translations should be adopted to help the audience understand the cultural significance behind them.

5. Conclusion

In the context of the film and television drama genre, the importance of titles seems to be subordinate to that of content. A drama with high-quality content can achieve the desired viewership through word-of-mouth and promotional efforts, even if its title is neither appealing nor appropriate. However, the author argues that this cannot serve as a justification for film and television drama producers to create titles randomly, nor for translators to handle the original titles without careful consideration. Furthermore, the fact that these dramas have already gained great popularity and secured a considerable audience base should not lead to the acquiescence in accepting their inappropriate translated titles. By enumerating the translations of the titles of two highly popular American TV dramas and analyzing the misunderstandings in their translations, the author aims to illustrate the importance of title rhetoric. When understanding the original text, translators should not only focus on the literal meaning but also clarify the rhetorical effects that the original title intends to achieve. Moreover, a casual attitude should not be adopted during the translation process. Even though the titles of film and television dramas are usually very concise, efforts should be made to ensure that they fulfill both the information transmission function and the appealing function.

Future research on the translation of film and television drama titles can be expanded from the perspective of interdisciplinary integration across multiple fields.

Combined with psychology, research can be conducted on the cognitive and emotional responses of audiences from different cultural backgrounds to titles, so as to further reveal the mechanism by which title rhetoric influences the audience's psychology. For instance, experimental studies can be carried out to explore the understanding and acceptance levels of audiences from different cultural backgrounds towards titles that employ rhetorical devices such as metaphor and hyperbole, thereby providing a more scientific basis for the selection of translation strategies. Integrated with communication studies, investigations can be made into the differences in the effects of title translations across various communication channels and platforms, as well as how to optimize the communication effects of title translations by leveraging the laws of communication. For example, in the era of social media, an analysis can be conducted on how title translations can adapt to the characteristics of online communication, so as to enhance the topicality and dissemination scope of film and television works.

In the digital age, audience feedback and evaluations are more easily accessible. In the future, a dynamic tracking and feedback mechanism can be established to collect real-time feedback from audiences on the translation of film and television drama titles, and to analyze the relationship between translation effects and audience acceptance. Through big data analysis of the discussions and evaluations on title translations made by audiences on platforms such as social media and film review websites, problems existing in the translation can be identified in a timely manner. Adjustments and optimizations can then be made to the translations based on the feedback, so as to better meet the needs of the audience.

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