The Study of Verbal Allusion Translation in Film Subtitle: Based on Relevance Theory

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Abstract—**This dissertation attempts to find a proper way of translating allusions in a film based on Relevance Theory through the comparison of two Chinese versions of *The Simpsons Movie*. According to Relevance Theory, the key of translation is to search and achieve the Optimal Relevance, thus allusion subtitle translation is considered as a process of achieving Optimal Relevance between the allusions in subtitles and the Target Language Viewers.**

Index Terms—**Relevance Theory, the Simpsons Movie, Optimal Relevance, verbal allusion**

As the advancement of the globalization, movie subtitling plays a key role in improving people's awareness of cultural diversity. People may achieve language acquisition and experience culture communication through watching a foreign movie. Most of the movies are rich in allusions which are originated from various fields, including mythology, historical events, fables, religion and literary works. Thus, more attention should be paid to the translation of allusion subtitling to make people better understand and enjoy the original intended meaning of the movie. *The Simpsons Movie*, which is also known as the Encyclopedia of American life, is a flash comedy produced by Twentieth Century Fox Company and its film version was first shown in 2007. The film shows us the American's lifestyles through the life of The Simpsons in a sarcastic way, and many allusions used in the film have made the film funnier and more impressive.

The translation of allusion subtitle cannot proceed well without the guidance of a proper theory. Good translation techniques guided by proper theory could make it much easier for the target viewers to understand the film just as the original viewers do. Thus, the dissertation attempts to find a proper way of translating allusions in a film based on relevance theory through the comparison of two Chinese versions of *The Simpsons Movie*.

I. SPERBER AND WILSON'S RELEVANCE THEORY

Relevance Theory was originally one of the four cooperative principles put forward by Herbert Paul Grice in 1960s for the Conversational Implicature Theory. RT is based on one of Grice's central claims that utterances automatically create expectations, which guides the hearer towards the speaker's meaning. Grice put forward the maxim of relevance, that is, make your contributions relevant. Based on this theory, in 1986, the French linguist and philosopher, Dan Sperber and English linguist Deirdre Wilson proposed their own theory for communication and cognition, the RT, which was later developed into the cognition-oriented theory on human communication.

According to Sperber and Wilson (1986), the notion of relevance was defined as a useful theoretical concept in a technical sense. Relevance is comparatively defined in terms of contextual effect and processing effort as "an assumption is relevance in a context if and only if it has some contextual effect in that context" (Sperber and Wilson, 1986, p.122). And its two extent conditions are as follows:

An assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that its contextual effects in this context are large. An assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that the effort required to process it in this context is small. (Sperber and Wilson, 1986)

The definition shows that: when other things are equal, the relevance is depending on two factors, that is, the greater the cognitive effects, the greater the relevance; the smaller the processing effort, the greater the relevance.

Example:

A: How much is the red hat?

B1: 2 dollars.

B2: 1 dollar cheaper than the blue one.

Obviously, B1 takes less processing effort than B2 does because B1 is linguistically simpler and contextually clear than B2. The understanding of B2 is based on the implicated context: how much is the blue hat? Thus, the relevance between A and B1, is larger than that of A and B2.

According to Sperber and Wilson (1986), Optimal Relevance is the key principle of the RT. The pursuit of OR between the communicator and the addressee makes communication succeed. OR means obtaining adequate contextual effects with minimum processing effort. It could be defined on two presumptions according to Sperber and Wilson

(1986, P. 270):

(1) The ostensive stimulus is relevant enough for it to be worth the addressee's effort to process it;

(2) The ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one compatible with the communicator's abilities and preferences.

Here the ostensive stimulus is a behavior. It can only be explained on the assumption that the communicator wanted to give evidence of his intention to convey some information.   Thus, both the communicator and the addressee should adjust the explicit and implicit information mutually in the expectation of optimal relevance.

II.   THE FEATURES OF *THE SIMPSONS MOVIE*

The Simpsons Movie, which was directed by David Silverman, is an American animated comedy film made in 2007 based on the animated cartoon sitcom *The Simpsons*. The film describes a recognizably American family in a fictional American town named Springfield. The Simpson family is a middle-class white family with a typical family structure of two adults, three kids, a cat and a dog. Using the environmental pollution as a clue, the movie describes the evil head of the Environmental Protection Agency who intends to destroy Springfield, in which a lake was polluted by Homer. At last, Homer succeeds to regain his dignity by stopping Cargill's scheme after being abandoned by his family and chased by the townspeople.

As have mentioned above, the film is based on the TV series *The Simpsons* which was regarded as "the Encyclopedia of America". Thus, the film is full of allusions which play a key role in adding the fun and humor of the movie, making the movie a bit difficult to understand, especially for a foreigner watching a translated version. Lepphalme (1997) believes that a cultural barrier can be a barrier in understanding an allusion, unless the receivers know well about the two cultures. The audience of *The Simpsons Movie* is of various types, even in the original target culture. The translator should take the different age, gender and nationality of the audience into consideration when choosing the translation strategies. Being such a popular movie, its subtitle translation, especially allusion translation, is of great importance.

III.   A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF VAT OF THE TWO CHINESE VERSIONS IN THE SIMPSONS MOVIE

A.   Verbal Allusion

As for Leppihalme (1997) who has been studying allusions and contributed a lot to this area, verbal allusions could be further divided into two groups: proper name allusions (PN) and key phrase allusions (KP). The allusions in *The Simpsons Movie* are shown mostly in dialogues as PN allusions or KP allusions.

PN allusion refers to the frame that carries the allusive meaning. Numerous examples are included in *The Simpsons Movie*, typically names of people (real-life and fictional), titles of fictional works, and names of organizations. Almost every character in *The Simpsons Movie* is a reference to someone. For example:

"This is **Kent Brockman**, reporting to you on a crisis so serious......it has its own name and theme music."

This is a reference to the TV series *The Simpsons* in which Kent Brockman is a TV guy who is stupid and silly and always broadcast the news without his own opinion.

Some PN allusions within subtitles and their correspondent Chinese translations are to be analyzed later.

KP allusions could be all other allusions which do not contain a proper name within the verbal allusions. In *The Simpsons Movie*, there are more PN allusions than KP allusions; it has a rather wide net.

Some allusions in the movie are also performed in the background sounds or some allusions in the movie are also performed in the background sounds or music for adding emotional effects or creating humorous atmosphere, but it is always difficult to translate them out.

Some PN allusions and their correspondent Chinese translations are to be analyzed later.

B.   The Techniques Used in the Translation of PN Allusions in Both Versions

Leppihalme (1997, P.79) classified the techniques used in the translation of PN allusions into three kinds: to keep the name unaltered, to change it, or to omit it. The following sections will discuss about whether these techniques are properly adopted in the translation of PN allusions by the principle of RT. There are totally 17 examples of the PN in this movie, and 7 typical examples are listed here.

Example 1

When the mouse *Itchy* defeated the cat and went back to his own country, the supporters shouted "**Itchy! Itchy!**" to elect him as their new president.

Version 1: 依奇！依奇！

Version 2: not translated

The *Itchy & Scratchy Show* is a show within a show that appears in *The Simpsons Movie* with a form of 100-second cartoon that is filled with much violence in the war between the mouse *Itchy* and the cat *Scratchy*. In version 1, it is transliterated into "依奇" while in version 2 the name is omitted. Many English names have transliterated Chinese corresponding terms, Chinese names, including "Itchy" in example 1, so translators can just replace the name with the conventional TL form. In this way, the target viewers can easily identify with the help of the scene that *Itchy* is just the name of the mouse. It needs little efforts of the target viewers yet they can totally enjoy the plot. However, in version 2, the name Itchy is improperly omitted in translation. Since the viewers are looking at the pictures on the screen and

meanwhile they can hear the shouting, the viewers would wonder what they are shouting for if we do not translate the name. According to the principle of RT, the greater the contextual effect is and the smaller the effort is, the more achievement of relevance.　Thus, version 1 uses a better technique than version 2 does by retaining the name.

Example 2

When in the church, grandpa shouted: **EPA...EPA....**Believe me!.

Version 1: **EPA...EPA**...相信我！

Version 2: **EPA...EPA(美国环境保护署)**...相信我！

EPA is the abbreviation of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which is an agency of the federal government of the United States in charge with protecting human health and the environment. Both versions adopt the technique of retention of name with Version 1 using the name as such while version 2 adding further explanations. When the Chinese viewers see the subtitles "EPA", they may not know the meaning of it. However, they may get some clues of the grandpa's words from version 2 by the adding guidance that it may be something related to environment. From this aspect, version 2 succeeds in making OR between the target viewers and the film.

Example 3

Somebody is not sure of whether he should go in or out when the dome is about to cover the Springfield where he lives: Oh God, in, out, in out, I never saw **Venus**.

Version 1: 天啊，是走是留，是走是留？**我总是这么犹豫不决**。

Version 2: 哦，上帝，进来，出去，进来，出去，我还没见过**维纳斯**呢。

Venus, which is named after the Roman goddess of love and beauty, is mainly associated with love, beauty, sex, sexual seduction and fertility, which plays a key role in many Roman religious festivals and myths.　Version 1 adopts the technique of omitting the proper name and the allusion altogether; however, it adds a sentence to describe the situation at that time.　However, this translation has nothing to do with the cultural elements of original text and is more or less inappropriate.　Version 2 adopts the technique of replacing the name by a TL name.　To a foreign language viewer, he may not know who Venus is, thus, he could not understand why the man said so at that situation. Since Venus stands for love and beauty, the translation should make the target viewers pay attention to this point and feel the humorous scene just as the SLVs would do.　Thus, both of the two versions fail to search relevance between the target viewers and the original film.　It seems that "我还没见过爱神维纳斯呢" would be better by adding additional information of"爱神".

Example 4

Somebody of the Springfield Book Club says: Ok, let's discuss *Tuesdays with Morrie.*

Version 1: 我们来讨论《周二与莫里同行》一书吧。

Version 2: 好吧，我们来和**莫瑞聊聊礼拜二**吧。

The non-fiction novel *Tuesdays with Morrie*, which was written by American writer Mithch Albom in 1997, is mainly about the story of the retired sociology professor Morrie Schwartz and his relationship with his students. On one hand, Chinese people may not be familiar with the book; on the other hand, the book has been read for many times to the club members and they are not interested in it any more. Therefore, it is enough for the viewers just to know that it is a name of a book. The best way for the translators is to translate it just as a book name, and the version 1 does so.

Example 5

Flander: Oh, Homer, I don't mean to be **Nervous Pervis** or anything, but if he falls, couldn't that make your boy parallel prejorino?

Homer:　Shut up, Flander!

Version 1:

Flander: 侯默，我不是**神经病或者变态**啥的，可是如果他掉下去了，他会不会落个半身不遂啊？

Homer:　闭嘴，佛兰德！

Version 2:

Flander: 哦，荷马，不是我**紧张**，但是如果他摔下来，可能会得脑震荡什的。

Homer: 闭嘴，佛兰德！

Pervis Ellison is a former college and professional NBA basketball player. After he played with the University of Louisville he was given the nickname "Never Nervous Pervis". He was regarded as the most outstanding player when he led Louisville to its second national championship in his freshman year, which was the second time a freshman had ever been awarded that honor. Thus, Nervous Pervis here means being nervous. Due to the time and space limits, both of the two versions have omitted the original allusion. However, the translation in version 1 is not faithful to the original text and meaning, while version 2, which adopts the technique of omitting the name but transfer the sense by its meaning, expresses the meaning exactly. From the second version the target viewers will get the same contextual information as the original viewers do and achieve the OR by minimal efforts, so version 2 is proper.

Example 6

Tom Hanks: Hello, I'm **Tom Hanks**! The U.S. government has lost its credibility, so it borrows some of mine.

Version 1: 你好！我是**汤姆 汉克斯**。美国政府已经丧失了他们的公信力，所以他们想借用点儿我的。

Version 2: 你们好！我是**汤姆 汉克斯（美国著名影星）**，美国政府已经没有信誉度了，所以我来出点小力。

Tom Hanks is an American writer, producer, actor, and director. He is famous for his films such as *Big*, *Philadelphia*, and *Forrest Gump*. While the original author may have assumed that their primary audience is well versed in, for example, the names of most famous Hollywood actors, a "culture bump" (Leppihalme, 1997, P.3) would probably occur since the TL viewers would be puzzled of who Tom Hanks is. As a familiar actor to the original viewers, Tom Hanks appears here as a satire of the American government who has no credibility to its citizens. But it will not raise the familiarity effect and achieve humorous result for the target viewers who may know little about Tom Hanks. Version 1 adopts the technique of replacing the name by the TL name. Version 2 adopts the technique of using its conventional TL form and adding explanation. With the adding information, the target viewers could use less effort in getting the greatest contextual effect. Thus, version 2 is much better than version 1.

Example 7

Russ Cargill: I want roving **death squads** around the perimeter 24/7.

Version 1: 我要**敢死队** 24 小时在罩子外巡逻。

Version 2: 我要在周围部署**巡逻队**，不间断巡逻。

Death squad is a military term which refers to the armed military, insurgent, police or terrorist squad who make killings such as assassinations of persons when there is a war, insurgency or terror campaign. Simply, the death squads usually focus on big issues or influential people. In the movie, the death squads of one thousand persons which are made of both tough guys and soft guys are ordered by the head of EPA, Russ Cargill, to find and bring the Simpsons who are just common people with the parents and three children back to the dome. The exaggeration used here is sarcasm of EPA. Both of the two versions adopt the technique of replacing the name by a TL name. However, it is translated as "敢死队" in Version 1 while "巡逻队" in version 2. In fact, "敢死队" is a name we used to describe those who contribute their lives for their big tasks rather than "巡逻队" which has a relatively weaker emotion. The image will appear in their minds when the target viewers see the words "敢死队", which help them enjoy the film with more contextual effects. In a word, the target viewers would reach the OR with fewer efforts with version 1 translation.

C. The Techniques Used in the Translation of KPA in Both Versions

Leppihalme (1997) has listed nine techniques for translating the KP allusions, which are based on the three categories of translating PN allusions, including using literal translation; replacing the key phrase in its standard TL form; adding additional information to the allusion; adding more explanation to explain the allusion; reduction of the allusion to sense by rephrasal; or omit it. There are 13 KP allusions in *The Simpsons Movie*, and 6 of them will be analyzed comparatively one by one.

Example 8

Billie Joe Armstrong: **Gentlemen, It's been an honor playing with you tonight.**

Version 1: 先生们，演奏今晚的告别曲吧。

Version 2: 先生们，很荣幸今晚能与你们一同演出。

At the beginning of the movie, the rock band wanted to talk about the environment after having been sung for three and a half hours, but were beaten by the things the audience threw and the boat they were standing on was about to sink. At this time, the band leader said the last words, which is a reference to the film *Titanic*. The film Titanic as well as its Chinese subtitles is very familiar to the Chinese people, of which the subtitles are almost the same words with version 2. Therefore, the viewers can easily recognize the scene and the subtitles by version 2 which adopts the technique of replacing the allusion in its standard TL form; hence they can enjoy it totally. Besides, version 1 fails to express the likeness between the scene in this movie and in Titanic which may not get the relevance between the target viewers and the film Titanic.

Example 9

Schwarzenegger: Gotten himme! **I'll have to go back making family comedies.**

Russ Cargill: Don't worry, I have a solution for you, sir. In fact, I have five solutions.

Version 1:

President Schwarzenegger: 见鬼，**我就只能回去演家庭喜剧了（施瓦辛格是好莱坞著名演员）。**

Russ Cargill: 别担心，我已经为您想好对策了。总统先生，事实上，我有五个对策。

Version 2:

President Schwarzenegger: 老天啊，**我又得回去演情景喜剧了。**

Russ Cargill: 别担心，我为您准备了解决方案。总统先生，事实上我有五套方案。

Arnald Schwarzenegger is a very famous actor of Hollywood, later he has been the governor of California from 2003 to 2011. Thus, in the movie, Schwarzenegger is positioned as the president of the United States, and if he can not deal with the problem he is facing, he would have to go back to his former career to be an actor. Version 1 chooses to add further explanation for the subtitles so as to show who Schwarzenegger is in real life, while version 2 just replaces it with its TL form. According to RT, a translator should try to coincide his informative intention with viewers' expectations. He must analyze the cognitive context and the expectations of the target viewers so that he could determine to what extent he should convey the original intention of the film. Hence, the translation of version 1 is based on the cognitive context of the target viewers and delivers the intention of the film successfully.

Example 10

Marge: What are you doing up here?

Bart: Looking through people's luggage. **I am the mascot of an evil corporation**.

Version 1:

Marge: 你跑到上面去干什么？

Bart: 检查别人的行李。**我是邪恶公司的吉祥物**。

Version 2:

Marge: 你在上面干什么？

Bart: 翻别人的行李啊。**我是恶魔集团的吉祥物**。

When Bart is on the train, he wears a black bra on his head like Disney-style ears. This is a reference to the scene of the film *Mickey Mouse* in which the Mickey Mouse calls himself "the mascot of an evil corporation". It is not difficult for the target viewers to recognize the Mickey Mouse because it is very familiar to everyone in the world. Thus, the target viewers could understand that it is just a imitation of Mickey Mouse by looking at the image on the screen and hearing the voice Bart imitates without paying much effort. Both of the two versions adopt the technique of translating it into the TL form which is appropriate.

Example 11

Policeman: Well, they are **China's problem** now.

Version 1: 现在他们是**中国的麻烦**了。

Version 2: 好了，现在他们是**中国的**麻烦了。

When the Simpsons get out of the dome through a sinkhole in front of their house, the sinkhole expands and causes a big damage. At this time, the policeman in Springfield says it is China's problem now. In fact, it is just a joke to claim it as China's problem. In North America, a common belief exists among small children that if they keep digging a hole in the ground they will emerge right through the planet to the other side of the world, which is presumed to be China. However, it would confuse the TL viewers. They may wonder: what does it have to do with China? Thus, the translator should add some explanation or additional information so that the target viewers could get the laugh point as the source target viewers will do. For example, it could be translated as "好了，现在他们是地球另一端中国的麻烦了".

Example 12

Lisa: Dad, do something!

Homer: This book doesn't have any answers!

Version 1:

Lisa: 爸，快想想该怎么办！

Homer: 《圣经》上根本没写该怎么办！

Version 2:

Lisa: 老爸，快想想办法啊！

Homer: 这书里找不到答案啊！

When grandpa says some crazy words in church, Lisa asks Homer to do something to stop it. But Homer opens the book Bible and says that the book does not have any answers. Bible is not only a very important book for those who believe in God, it is also a book that has great influence on the English literature and people who speaks English. Everybody who goes to the church will bring a Bible with himself. They believe that Bible is guidance for them in their daily life. Thus, Homer wants to find the answer from Bible when grandpa becomes crazy. As it is a common sense for the TL viewers to understand what Bible is since there are also Bibles in the TL form, the allusion here should be translated by replacing it with its TL form. Therefore, version 1 is a good translation. Version 2 does not translate it, which will make the target viewers feel confused of what "这本书" in refers to. According to RT, version 2 will cost the TL viewers of more processing efforts than needed to get the enough contextual effects, which decides that it is not a good translation.

Example 13

At the beginning of the film, Green Day plays "**Nearer, My God, to Thee**" on violins when the barge is sinking caused by the pollution. This is an allusion to the film *Titanic*, within which the band plays the same music.

From the above comparative analysis on the examples of VA we could conclude that both of the two versions have succeeded in translating the allusions to some extent. They all adopt several kinds of techniques in their translation of allusions, despite some of them are not properly used if evaluated by the principle of RT.

IV. CONCLUSION

According to RT, the key of translation is to search and achieve the OR, thus allusion subtitle translation is considered as a process of achieving OR between the allusions in subtitles and the TLVs. Based on this principle, some translation techniques below are concluded from the analysis of *The Simpsons Movie*, which could be also suitable for the translation of allusions in all movies of this kind:

a. When translating PN allusions, five techniques could be used in different condition, which includes:

(1) Retain the name in its TL form when it can be understood directly by the TLVs, such as in example 1;

(2) Retain the name as such and add further explanation when needed, such as in example 6;

(3) Retain the name in its conventional TL form and add additional information to make the allusion more clear, such as in example 2, 3, 4; Replace the name by a common name in TL form to achieve the OR without paying efforts in getting the allusion, such as in example 7;

(4) Omit the name but transfer the sense by its meaning when there is no need to translate the allusion since the TL viewers can achieve the same contextual effects without knowing the allusion, such as in example 5,.

b. When translating KP allusions, six techniques can be adopted accordingly:

(5) Use literal translation when it is easy for the TL viewers to get the allusions, such as in example 10;

(6) Replace the key phrase in its standard TL form since there are conventional forms for these allusions which can stimulate the TL viewers with the similar context with the context the allusion carries on, such as in example 8;

(7) Add additional information to the allusion to describe the context more clearly when the meaning of the allusion can be make concise by the additional information, such as in example 11;

(8) Use further explanation to supplement the allusion when it allowed by time and space limits, and when further explanation is required for the understanding of the context, such as in example 9;

(9) Reduce the allusion to its sense by rephrasing when the attempted meaning should be expressed in another way, such as in example 12;

(10) Omit the allusion when songs are used to create the atmosphere for some special scenes which need not to be translated, such as in example 13.

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