

Application of the Concept of Defamiliarization in Translation Studies: Case Studies of the Translation of Film Titles

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Abstract—As more and more foreign films stream into China, the importance of translation of film titles is becoming obvious. A good film title can not only convey the theme of a film, but also grab the attention and inspire the aesthetic emotion of the audience. The aim of defamiliarization theory is to evoke the aesthetic emotion of people which has been widely used in the translation of film titles. Yet some translations of film titles decrease the defamiliarization effect and present audience with more familiar content. This thesis probes into the application of “defamiliarization” in translation studies, summarizes the methods of translating film titles and discusses the issues of defamiliarization degree, hoping to provide new ideas of translating film titles.

Index Terms—defamiliarization, film title, translation studies

I. INTRODUCTION

Film title is the first window opened up for audience. Whether a foreign film title is translated properly can directly influence the audience’s first impression of the film and passion of enjoying it. With more and more foreign films being introduced into China, the importance of how to translate a foreign film title is becoming obvious. Translators are doing their best to search for better ways to translate film titles. This thesis is to probe into the application of “defamiliarization” in translation studies, discuss the methods of translating film titles and the “degree” of defamiliarization in the process of translating from the perspective of defamiliarization theory.

II. DEFAMILIARIZATION THEORY: DEBATE ABOUT TWO POLES

Defamiliarization is a core concept of Russian formalism. Viktor Shklovsky, who is a theorist of Russian formalism, has pointed out that “the technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (Shklovsky, 1998, p.16). Russian formalists hold the opinion that people always look for something “new” during their aesthetic process, which means they prefer novel content and expression. During aesthetic process, some elements should be highlighted to reduce the automaticity and mechanization of reading and arouse people’s emotion. Only in this way can aesthetic subject get their aesthetic pleasure.

However, some other scholars think that people always look for something “same” during the aesthetic process and put forward “perceptual fluency hypothesis”(Martindale & Moore, 1988; Reber et al.’s, 1998; Winkielman et al.’s, 2006). This hypothesis holds the opinion that unfamiliar contents bring intensive cognitive load. Compared with contents which are cognitively difficult, people prefer familiar things. Therefore, only by making things more familiar can people get more aesthetic pleasure.

III. “TWO POLES” OF THE CONCEPT OF “DEFAMILIARIZATION” IN TRANSLATION STUDIES

The debate about “two poles” of defamiliarization raises that of defamiliarization translation----one is to reduce the cognitive distance through translation and approach unfamiliar object with familiar conventional experience; the other is to increase the cognitive distance through translation and approach familiar object with relatively unfamiliar experience. According to Formalist literary theorists, the subject accepts familiar matters in automatic sensitivity. The key point of defamiliarization is to extend the aesthetic process. The more the readers’ psychological expectation caused by the meaning which translators give to translated texts during the translation process is and the greater the distance of which the reconstructed semantics deviates from conventional ones in the translated texts, the longer (within an accept limit) the aesthetic process is. There are something that can not be automatically perceived for readers in translated texts, extending readers’ aesthetic process, increasing readers’ perceptive difficulty and experience time. Compared with automatic perception, readers perceive more aesthetically. Conversely, the shorter the aesthetic process is, the less

readers perceive aesthetically compared with automatic perception.

It is similar to “adequacy” and “acceptability” proposed by Toury (1995, p.57). “adequacy” means that translators adhere to the norms of source language and culture to produce translated texts which maximally retain contents and features of original texts on the levels of language and culture. There are some difficulties for target language readers during their reading, since translators try to represent the features of the original texts during the translation process. “acceptability” means that translators adhere to norms of target language and culture to produce translated texts which are not very difficult for target language readers during their reading, since translators consider their reading experience, aesthetic habits and cognitive competence. The deviation of meaning and form of translated texts with adequacy is severe, lengthening readers’ aesthetic process. It is a translation way of “seeking the new” which is at one end of defamiliarization translation. The deviation of meaning and form of translated texts with acceptance is not so severe, shortening readers’ aesthetic process. It is a translation way of “seeking the same” which is at the other end of defamiliarization translation.

In fact, the “adequacy” and “acceptability” of translated text discussed above are not always corresponding to the “seeking the new” and “seeking the same” of defamiliarization. For example, contents of the original texts that are familiar to source language reader can become unfamiliar to target language readers when they are translated into target language culture. Similar situation exists in translated texts with acceptability. Contents that have strong defamiliarization effect in original texts can become familiar to target language readers after the translators’ consideration of language readers’ reading experience, cultural background etc. Wu Ying (2007) holds the opinion that “defamiliarization” put forward by Formalists is a kind of expression technique, involving one single text. However, it involves original text and translated text in translation. It is necessary to define the “defamiliarization” of source language and target language separately. As a special kind of communication activity, defamiliarization effect cannot always be the same between source culture and target culture. In some situations, defamiliarization effect in source language culture disappears when it is put into target language culture, and in other situations, expression technique that is not defamiliarization can produce defamiliarization effect in translated texts. This reflects the complexity of defamiliarization theory’s application in translation studies. Since the concept “defamiliarization” in translation studies is much more complicated in Russian Formalism, it is necessary to define the concept “defamiliarization” in translation first before further discussions.

IV. THE CONCEPT OF “DEFAMILIARIZATION” IN TRANSLATION STUDIES

Defamiliarization theory exerts influences over different art levels like literature, drama, film and so on. At the same time, it also exerts influences over translation of art language during which many translators inherit defamiliarization theory’s spirit of pursuing novelty which means that translators put defamiliarization theory into practice. Some of the translators (Even-Zohar 2000; Gentzler, 2001; Sun Yifeng, 2003; Sun Huijun, 2005) take defamiliarization as their translation object. When defamiliarization expressions appear in a source text, translators present the strangeness and defamiliarization of the expression in the target text; some of the translators (Seamus, 1988; Zheng Hailing, 2002; 2003) take defamiliarization as their translation principles and choose defamiliarization methods during translation process to produce the target text. However, some translators choose to decrease the contents containing defamiliarization effect during the translation process. They translate the defamiliarization part with contents that are familiar to readers, hoping to bring readers more fluent aesthetic experience and higher recognition of identity.

About the concept “defamiliarization” in translation studies, early translation studies hold the opinion that since literary quality is the primary feature of literary works, it should be conveyed into translated texts, giving translated texts the same aesthetic feeling which means literary quality (Gentzler, 2001). Levy, the representative scholar, makes it clear that “if an expressive feature does not work in the receiving culture, then the translator must replace it or even invent a new feature so that the overall literary quality is not lost” (Gentzler, 2001, p.88). The “expressive feature” can be one of the features that produce defamiliarization effect in original texts. Even-Zohar (2000) also suggests that “.....some literatures have taken peripheral positions, which is only to say that they were often modelled to a large extent upon an exterior literature. For such literatures, translated literature is not only a major channel through which fashionable repertoire is brought home, but also a source of reshuffling and supplying alternatives. Thus, whereas richer or stronger literatures may have the option to adopt novelties from some periphery within their indigenous borders, ‘weak’ literatures in such situations often depend on import alone” (p.194). The “bring home fashionable repertoire” and “adopt novelties” here provide a way of retaining new literary expressions and images in original texts, trying to represent the defamiliarization effect of source language culture in target language culture. It is similar to “dynamic equivalence” put forward by Nida which could be stated as “The readers of a translated texts should be able to comprehend it to the point that they can conceive of how the original readers of the text must have understood and appreciated it” (Nida, 2000, p.87). This means that the main emphasis of translation is on the feeling of target language readers. These translation studies see defamiliarization as translation object and confine it between texts and readers.

Zheng Hailing from China see defamiliarization as a translation strategy and confine it between original text and target text and highlights translator’s subjectivity. In one thesis citing examples to discuss defamiliarization translation, Zheng Hailing (2002) says that “for the original text, this translation way is a kind of ‘defamiliarization’ which is ‘domestication’ for Chinese readers ‘defamiliarization’ can both be ‘demestication’ and ‘foreignization’. The latter

one can bring translated texts exotic flavour. The key point of 'defamiliarization' is whether translators' expression technique is novel and can evoke readers' aesthetic feelings" (p.49). He equates "defamiliarization" with translation strategies of "domestication" and "foreignization". He also says that "applying 'defamiliarization' to translation is precisely the recreation of translators. The application of 'defamiliarization' usually produces distance in language forms between original texts and translated texts, highlighting artistic effect recreated by translators. This translation way reflects the awakening of translators' subjectivity and importance of creativity of literary translation. It is conventional that translated texts should be faithful to original texts, yet in literary translation, translators usually deviate from the partial to realize the faithfulness of the whole" (Zheng Hailing, 2003, p.45). However, Russian Formalists define "defamiliarization" between aesthetic subject and aesthetic object, namely between texts and readers. It puts emphasis on readers' feelings. What is more, "defamiliarization" in Formalism is put forward with literariness and is an artistic technique of realizing the literalization of texts. It exists in one single language, whereas translation strategy relates to two languages and is a interlingual transformation way.

Based on the review of "defamiliarization" in translation studies, this thesis will discuss film title translation under the following definitions: (1) "defamiliarization" in translation studies is a kind of translation strategy (according to discussion of "two poles" of defamiliarization, there are some specific translation methods under strategy. "see below"); (2) "defamiliarization" in translation studies can both be defined between two aesthetic objects (the original text and the translated text), and between aesthetic object and aesthetic subject (the original text and original reader, or the translated text and target reader, or the original text and translator, or the translated text and reader); (3) "defamiliarization" in translation studies puts emphasis on the feelings of target readers.

V. TRANSLATION OF FILM TITLES: FOUR METHODS

Film, which is a comprehensive art, is an art form of spreading culture. A film title is not only high compression of the whole film contents, but also the first window that is opened up for audience. According to the differences of methods and degree dealing with defamiliarization, this thesis sums up four translation methods during the translating process---keep unfamiliar, from familiar to unfamiliar, from unfamiliar to familiar and keep familiar.

A. *Keep Unfamiliar*

There are a lot of translations of film titles choose the way of keep unfamiliar. Specifically it can be divided into two kinds. Firstly, the original film title itself is created in a defamiliarization way and its translation keeps the unfamiliar effect. The information of a film is firstly conveyed through the film title, so how to catch the eyes of audience is the key point. Many film titles are created in the way of defamiliarization to extend audience's aesthetic process and impress them very much. These translations of film titles mostly keep the unfamiliar effect. For example, when "Rain Man" was released, "rain man" itself was then a new and novel expression. According to the title, the audience will associate the content of the film with somebody related to rain. However, after watching the film, they find that the leading character, whose name is Raymond, has a problem of lisp. When he pronounces his name, it sounds like "rain man". The title "rain man" also plays a crucial role on one plot linking up with another. It reminds the brother of the leading character of the fact that the imaginary rain man in brother's childhood memory turns out to be his real older brother. This film's title is translated in a way of literal translation, retaining almost the same defamiliarization effect as the original film title. The word "rain man" is also unfamiliar to Chinese audience. It is not common to see a man related to rain. In this way, interest of audience in this film is aroused. Although the translation of the film title cannot convey the homophonic effect of the leading character's name "Raymond", it calls for the plot of the "rain man" being afraid of rain. The translation of this film title "rain man" is not abrupt but can attract audience's attention. Another example is "The Shinning" which itself is an unconventional expression. "shinning" means glittering and sparkling and often used as an adjective not a noun. After the film, audience will find that "The Shinning" is a specific reference, referring to a special ability of mind perceiving which the cook named Dick says in the film. The one who owns this ability can communicate by ideas and has an insight into the past and the future. Danny, the son of the leading character Jack, foresees tragic events happening one after another in the house through the ability. Usually, this film is translated as "Shan Ling" in Chinese. This translation not only retains the defamiliarization effect of the original title, but also is new and novel to Chinese audience. The word "Ling" is like a flash of light and at the same time renders horrible atmosphere. Incidentally, "Shan Ling" happens to be the transliteration of "shinning". "Shan Ling" perfectly retains the original defamiliarization effect, successfully arousing audience's curiosities. "Shan Ling" is correspondent with the original title in phonology and form. Other translations like "Gui Dian" (meaning "ghost store" in Chinese), "You Guang" (meaning "ghost light" in Chinese) are, by contrast, inferior in these respects. Translations that retain the defamiliarization effects of the original titles are not uncommon. Some are translated in a literal way. For example, "The Lovely Bones" is translated into "Ke Ai De Gu Tou"; "The Silence of Lambs" is translated into "Chen Mo De Gao Yang". Those translations all retain the suspenseful or horrible effect of the original titles. Another examples such as "the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" and "The Fifth Element" are literally translated into "Yin He Xi Man You Zhi Nan" and "Di Wu Yuan Su" which also retain strong unfamiliar feelings that science fiction films bring to audience. Besides, some translations are not in a literal way, instead, the translations are results of interpretation of the film. This translation method can retain the defamiliarization effect of the original. For example, the "Sideways". The original title

uses metaphor, implying that the leading character gets off his regular life track. “Sideways” is translated into “Bei Jiu Ren Sheng” which derives from different attitudes of the leading character toward wine in the film. Likewise, the Chinese title explains life through wine in a metaphorical way. It is not a literal translation, so the meaning of Chinese title is quite different from that of the original. However, both titles use metaphor to achieve the same goal of interpreting character’s life.

Secondly, the original film title does not use defamiliarization technique, however, it is unfamiliar to Chinese audience. The Chinese title keeps the defamiliarization effect. Most of this kind of titles have deep background of the source language culture which is not familiar to Chinese audience. For example “Avatar”. It originates from Indian Sanskrit, meaning “reincarnation”. After years of development, it is written in Latin and finally accepted by English. To English-speaking country audience, it has conveyed the essence of the film. However, it is not familiar to Chinese audience. Translators make no explanatory translation and transliterate it into “A Fan Da”, retaining the defamiliarization effect. There are many other translations like this, such as “Ge Si La” (Godzilla), “Tai Tan Ni Ke Hao” (Titanic), “Zhen Zhu Gang” (Pear harbor), “Fang Tu Li Ba” (Rabbit ProofFence) and so on.

B. From Familiar to Unfamiliar

Some translations have no defamiliarization effect either from the perspective of creation or Chinese audience’s reception. Yet translators do some recreations during translating process, adding some defamiliarization elements to attract audience’s attention. For example, “The Double Life of Weronigqe”. It tells a story of two girls, one living in France and the other in Poland. They have the same appearance, name and even details of life, like one person living a double life. The original title is a clear summary of the film contents. If it is translated into “Wei Luo Ni Ka De Shuang Chong Sheng Huo”, it can exactly convey the meaning of the original title and be accepted by Chinese audience, however, there is no defamiliarization effect. The translation “Liang Sheng Hua” (meaning flowers of two lives) compare people to flowers, extending aesthetic distance of the audience and bringing defamiliarization effect. This translation implies the theme of the film and has poetic beauty, corresponding to poetic plot in the film. It is successful to recreate the original film title through defamiliarization way during translating process. Another example is “Mission: impossible” which is translated into “Bu Ke Neng Wan Cheng De Ren Wu” both of which are common expressions. But the translation “Die Zhong Die” extends the aesthetic time and has defamiliarization effect. In Chinese the first “Die” and the second “Die” have the same pronunciation but different form, which can provoke people’s thinking. The first “Die” refers to a disk and the second one refers to a spy, both of which are key elements of the film.

C. From Unfamiliar to Familiar

Some translations of film titles retain no defamiliarization effect of the original title, instead, the original titles are translated into ones that are familiar to Chinese audience. Generally speaking, if these kind of titles are translated in a literal way, the translations will be unfamiliar to Chinese audience and can not attract audience’s attention. As a result, translators make some creative transformation during translating process. For example, “Forrest Gump”. If it is transliterated into “Fu Lei Si Te·Gang Pu”, it is just a meaningless foreign name to Chinese audience, too many words and without any attractions. Another translation “A Gan Zheng Zhuan” is more appropriate. For one thing, the leading character is called “A Gan”, which brings Chinese audience intimacy, conveys a feeling of nobody; for another, “Zheng Zhuan” embodies that the film is a miniature of the leading character’s whole life. Compared with the title of transliteration, the catchy translation “A Gan Zheng Zhuan” is more attractive to audience despite the lack of defamiliarization. Another example is “The Other Boleyn Girl”. If it is transliterated into “Ling Yi Ge Bo Lin Jia De Nv Hai”, it will be faithful to the original title and have defamiliarization effect, however, it will make audience confused. If it is translated into “Jiu Zhan Que Chao” (meaning “A turtledove takes over the nest of a magpie”), it is more vivid. “Jiu Zhan Que Chao” is an idiom that is widely known to Chinese people and also summarizes the contents of the film, reflecting that it is a story full of struggle. This can easily arouses people’s desire to watch the movie. There are many such translations of this kind like “The Bridges of Madison County” (translated into “Lang Qiao Yi Meng”), “The wizard of Oz” (translated into “Lv Ye Xian Zong”), “Gone With the Wind” (translated into “Luan Shi Jia Ren”), “The Groods” (translated into “Feng Kuang Yuan Shi Ren”) and so on.

D. Keep Familiar

Some film titles are originally familiar to Chinese audience, so translators make no modifications during translating process and present them to audience in the form of what is familiar to Chinese audience. For example, some films that are adapted from literary classics like “Jian Ai” (translated from *Jane Eyre*), “Tai Si” (translated from *Tess*), “Ju Li Fu Ren” (translated from *Madam Currie*), “An Na·Ka Lie Ni Na” (translated from *Anna Karenina*), etc. Some are adapted from popular books like series of “Ha Li·Bo Te” (translated from *Harry Potter*), etc. These are popular as books, so it is the best option to use the original translation titles. Some film titles like “Oceans”, “The Travelling Birds/Le peuple migrateur” which have obvious documentary features are obvious and straight to the point and translated into “Hai Yang”, “Qian Xi De Niao” which retain those features.

VI. “DEGREE” OF DEFAMILIARIZATION: INTEGRATION OF TWO POLES

Among the above translation strategies, some retain defamiliarization effect of the original titles or are translated from familiar to unfamiliar, yet some are translated to the contrary, from unfamiliar to familiar, or retain familiarization effect of the original titles. What kind of translations on earth are the most attractive? It is related to the question of “degree” of defamiliarization. To what degree of defamiliarization can people get the best aesthetic experience?

In fact, early in two thousand years ago Aristotle has mentioned about the question of degree of defamiliarization. Aristotle points out that strange words or phrases make people confused and common ones can only convey known information. Only metaphorical language can make people feel fresh. The function of metaphor is to lead people from the unknown to the known. Yang Xiangrong also mentions this point. He suggests that “there is a problem of ‘degree’ about defamiliarization. ‘Defamiliarization’ should be realized within the comprehension of receptors” (Yang Xiangrong, 2006, p.345). In recent years, the Optimal Innovation Hypothesis in cognitive domain points out that not only metaphor can bring novelty and beauty, aesthetic pleasure can be produced as long as the bridge that connects the unknown and the known is built. The hypothesis holds the opinion that “it is neither pure innovation nor familiarity alone that account for highly aesthetic judgments. Rather, it is optimal innovation--novelty that allows an insight into some salient response--that is most pleasurable” (Giora et al.’s, 2004, p.137-138). According to Optimal Innovation Hypothesis, the best translation of film titles should possess information that are both innovative and familiar to audience. So, while putting an emphasis on “defamiliarization”, translators should also pay attention to the acceptability and readability of translated texts. If the degree of defamiliarization is too high, readers cannot get their artistic enjoyment. Examples are as follows.

Translations that retain defamiliarization effect like “Rain Man” has another translation, “Shou Zu Qing Wei Liao” (meaning brotherhood forever). “Rain Man” is an innovative phrase itself, yet with the two familiar images of “rain” and “man”. It arouses association of ideas and possesses both innovation and defamiliarization, bringing audience aesthetic pleasure. “Shou Zu Qing Wei Liao”, by contrast, is a summary of the film contents, and almost daily language, lacking unfamiliar information. So “Shou Zu Qing Wei Liao” cannot arouse audience’s curiosities as “Rain Man”. It is the same with “Shan Ling” and “Bei Jiu Ren Sheng”. The two are also translated into “Gui Dian” and “Xun Zhao Xin Fang Xiang” (meaning looking for a new direction). The latter translations are too common and lack innovative contents. As a result, they cannot arouse aesthetic feelings. According to Optimal Innovation Hypothesis, “A Fan Da” is not a good translation. It is too unfamiliar to Chinese audience who will assume it a person’s name which is in fact the name of a project and of all substitutes. The other translations of this film title like “Tian Shen Xia Fan” (meaning God descends to the world) and “Hua Shen” basically convey the meaning of the original title, but lack enough innovative effect. If it is translated into “A Fan Da Ji Hua” (meaning project Avatar) which possesses both innovative and familiar information, it may be more appropriate. Among the titles translated from familiar to unfamiliar, “Liang Sheng Hua” uses the way of metaphor, extending a long enough aesthetic distance and fully conveying the film contents. Another translation “Wei Luo Ni Ka De Shuang Chong Sheng Huo” of this film title, by contrast, is too smooth and plain. Among the titles translated from unfamiliar to familiar like “Feng Kuang Yuan Shi Ren”. “Yuan Shi Ren” (meaning primitive man) is a familiar image to audience. The words that are related to “Yuan Shi Ren” are usually ignorant, uncivilized, etc. It is novel and unfamiliar to use “Feng Kuang” (meaning crazy) to describe “Yuan Shi Ren”, so the title “Feng Kuang Yuan Shi Ren” possesses both innovative and familiar information, attracting audience’s attentions. Its another translation “Gu Lu Jia Zu” (meaning Gu Lu family) is too unfamiliar to audience. As for the titles that are already widely known to people have made people form fixed cognition of the original works. And documentary films have particular features. Both the two last kinds of film titles should be discussed under a separate standard because of their familiarity to audience.

In the translation of film titles, the representation of “Other” of language and culture in the original titles and the challenge to their expressiveness in target language constitute the nature of artistic recreation of translation. The novelty of target language titles makes target readers consistently discover new things, evokes their aesthetic interest in cultural “Other” and activates the reading appreciation process. It not only raise the novelty pursued by target language titles up to the height of ontological study of translation, that is to say translation is the representation of novel theme, technique and image relative to familiar parallel texts, but also supports the view of “reserving differences” in translation ethics. This shows the respect for foreignness in source texts and the identity of artistic creation in target language. During the process of translating film titles, the application of “defamiliarization” strategy creatively can propel the evolution of language forms and produce aesthetic values.

In conclusion, when translators do film title translations, no matter in the way of defamiliarization or reducing defamiliarization effect, translators should consider the information both innovative and familiar to audience. In this way, the aesthetic time can be properly extended, and aesthetic pleasure and interest to watch a movie can also be aroused.

VII. CONCLUSION

The translation of film titles is a kind of aesthetic recreation. From the perspective of translation aesthetics, translators should integrate the film style, theme and the aesthetic interest of target language audience with cultural background in aesthetic thinking. Defamiliarization can produce specific aesthetic effect, however, the realization of defamiliarization is not the result of pure language operation. As a kind of art, film also possesses the common nature of art, that is the aesthetic nature. A good film title itself is a condensed fantastic art with high aesthetic value.

During the process of film titles translating, how to produce aesthetic distance, invoke aesthetic emotion and arouse passion to watch a movie are questions that translators should be constantly thinking and exploring. Only starting from the aesthetic way of art participating in reality, can translators better comprehend, appreciate and convey aesthetic effect of defamiliarization. This thesis probes into the application of “defamiliarization” in translation studies, summarizes the four methods dealing with defamiliarization translation. Through the discussion of the “degree” of defamiliarization, this paper points out that a good translation of a film title should be combinations of both familiar and unfamiliar information. As translators use defamiliarization methods more skillfully, more good translations of film titles will be produced.

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