PhD Thesis Abstract

Cultureme Translation in Film Subtitling

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1. Background

This research aims to identify the main strategies used in cultureme translation by analyzing the overall strategies employed in the English subtitling of Korean films. The importance of culture has been widely stressed in the field of translation, particularly when Snell-Hornby introduced the "cultural turn"(2006: 47), and research on the particular cultural elements or references ("cultureme", in this dissertation) have been conducted.

The starting point of this research was the author's personal experience in film subtitling in 2006 in which he witnessed a series of peculiar aspects in translating proper nouns of source text(ST). In the translation process some of the proper nouns were rendered, not in the form of maintaining the original forms, but in the form of substitution to enhance the understandability of the target culture(TC) audience. This phenomenon was not restricted solely to proper nouns, but observed in various forms of cultural expressions. Given the inherent nature of audiovisual translation(AVT), which includes the translation of non-verbal expressions such as images and sounds along with the verbal texts, the author came to believe in the necessity of an in-depth study on the translation strategy of culturemes in AVT.

2. Research Questions and Methods

In order to identify the features of cultureme translation in film subtitling, this research was conducted under two main questions:

1) What are the main strategies in cultureme translation in film subtitling?
2) What are the variables involved in cultureme translation?

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To answer these research questions, the author employed a four-stage preparation process. To begin, he selected 12 Korean movies subtitled in English by the Korean Film Council, a quasi-autonomous non-governmental organization which strives to promote the introduction of Korean movies abroad, and analyzed a total of 11,704 subtitles. Secondly, the collected movies were analyzed to identify culturemes and the strategies used in translation. As a result, a total of 3,239 culturemes were detected, and these culturemes were categorized into four main groups: proper nouns(names of places, persons and buildings, brands, etc.), cultural expressions(traditional weights and measures, Korean foods, currency units, etc.), social expressions(vulgarisms, slang, insults, puns, etc.), and idiomatic expressions(proverbs, maxims, idioms, etc). Thirdly, the collected data were analyzed from the perspectives of preservation, substitution, and omission. Finally, the remarkable translation strategies used in cultureme translation were presented.

The translation strategies of the identified culturemes were divided into three main categories: preservation(literal translation, partial translation), substitution(addition of information, generalization, cultural substitution, and situational substitution), and omission. This analysis tool was prepared by modifying the model presented by Pedersen(2011) for the formation of the research.

3. Research Findings

3.1. Main Translation Strategies in Film Subtitling

Among the 3,239 culturemes, the share of social expressions was the highest(1,665) followed by proper nouns(1,294), idiomatic expressions(147) and cultural expressions(133). While preservation was mostly used with 49.1 percent in frequency, details varied by groups. For example, the proper noun group employed preservation the most with 75.2 percent, followed by substitution(14.9%) and omission(9.9%). However, substitution was found as the prevalent strategy for cultural expressions(54.1%), social expressions(48.1%), and idiomatic expressions(64.6%). At the same time, groups showed different preferences by subcategory. First, proper nouns used the translation strategies in the order of literal translation, omission, generalization, partial preservation, cultural substitution, situational substitution, and addition of information. Second, cultural expressions used literal translation most often, followed by cultural substitution, generalization, omission, situational substitution, partial preservation, and addition of information. Third, the order of strategies used in social expressions is literal translation, omission, generalization, cultural substitution, situational substitution, addition of information, and partial preservation. And idiomatic expressions were translated in the order of cultural substitution, literal translation, generalization, situational substitution, and omission. The most commonly-used translation sub-strategy was identified as literal translation(which belongs to the category of conservation), and the preference of translation strategy varied significantly by each group.

3.2. Translation Variables in Film Subtitling

The variables engaged in the cultureme translation process were identified as follows: inherent constraints of AVT, multi-semiotic features, importance of ST cultureme, repetition, understandability of TT audience, and arbitrary decisions made by a translator. Basically, film subtitling is a translation of the spoken language into a written message, and therefore, a reduction in the translating process is inevitable. Hence, this feature is affected significantly in employing an omission strategy. Multi-semiotic features also influence the use of an omission strategy as in some cases, a sound or an image complemented the delivery of a message and enabled omission of ST in TT subtitles. The importance of ST cultureme was a starting point of the decision making: preserving ST in TT or not. Meanwhile, repetition was a feature influencing omission: the more the frequency of repetition appeared, so did the use of omission strategy. Understandability of TT audience affected the overall translation strategy where the translator decides the basic direction: domestication or foreignization. All of these features were seemed to be closely linked to the arbitrary decision-making of a translator, as it is the very translator who ultimately decides the translation strategy in the translating process.

4. Conclusion

As described above, this research was conducted to identify remarkable strategies in translating culturemes and variables engaged in the translation

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process by analyzing the English subtitles of 12 Korean movies. The conclusions drawn from this research are as follows:

First, the frequency of translation strategies varied by the categories classified in this paper.

Second, inherent constraints of AVT, multi-semiotic features, importance of ST culturemes, repetition, understandability of TT audience, and arbitrary decision-making of a translator were presented as translation variables.

Third, the concepts of diachrony and synchrony were applied to expand the research area of cultureme translation. This research presented three types of cultureme translations from this perspective: maintaining synchrony, maintaining diachrony, and shifting from diachrony to synchrony. It is believed that a case of shifting from synchrony to diachrony was not found as film subtitling usually targets a contemporary general audience.

However, this research has some limitations. First, the corpus was limited to 12 movies and the analyzed movies were made during a specific period of time. If the number of movies and the scope of production time are expanded, more interesting results can be drawn. Second, this research was conducted without directly interviewing translators. Though it was a product-oriented research, such interviews would be helpful in more precisely identifying the translation process.

Despite these limitations, this research is meaningful for the following reasons: First, it is one of the first studies confining the research target to the culturemes in film translation. Second, the research can be useful in AVT training which will enhance the competence of translators focusing on the importance of cultureme.

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