

## Translation of American Movie Titles from the Perspective of Skopos Theory

Yongli Sun<sup>1, a</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai Maritime University, Shanghai 201306, China.

<sup>a</sup>2236771001@qq.com

### Abstract

**Titles always first attract people's attention in numerous advertising posters of movies. Good translation of movie titles can not only reveal the content of movies, but also attract audience to watch them, playing a vital role in the movie promotion. Studying the translation of movie titles from linguistic typologies of tradition shifts can no longer meet the need of the commercial development of the movie industry. Different from traditional theories of equivalence in meaning, skopos theory no longer regards translation as a simple code conversion, but treats movie translation as a purposeful communicative act, which can better realize the commercial value of movies. Guided by skopos theory, this paper analyzes the title translation of thirty-one American movies that rank in the top 100 box office in mainland China in 2019, and discusses the translation methods of these popular American movies, providing some references for the Chinese translation of American movie titles in the future.**

### Keywords

**American movies in 2019, skopos theory, translation of titles.**

### 1. Introduction

Movie is a modern art which combines vision and hearing, and it is deeply favored by people as one of the most important forms for artistic expression and it has become an important way for entertainment in the daily life of people. According to the data released by the National Film Administration on the evening of December 31, 2019, the box office and the number of audience throughout the year in the Chinese movie market reached new highs, which means Chinese movie market is becoming an important part of the global movie industry. In the year of 2019, the annual box office of the Chinese movie market reached 64.266 billion, increased by 5.4% compared with 2018, and the total number of viewers in the city cinema reached 1.727 billion. With the rapid development of the economic globalization and the spread of scientific and technological information, an increasing number of American movies have been introduced to China. Among the top 100 box office in mainland China in 2019, there are thirty-one American movies, second only to domestic movies, reflecting Chinese audiences' love for American movies. The huge box office returns of American movies are inseparable from good translation. Wonderful translation of movie titles can attract audience to watch the movies and make interested parties get more profits, which is the primary purpose of the translation of English movie titles[1]. This paper analyzes the title translation of American movies in the year of 2019, and points out that the translation of American movie titles should be based on the principle of achieving the function of movie titles from the perspective of skopos theory put forward by Hans J. Vermeer.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Previous Studies on Translation of Movie Titles

Systematic translation of movies begins from the reform and opening up in China. As an important field in the research of movie translation, the study of movie title translation is at the exploration stage. There are few monographs on movie title translation at home and abroad, and only some chapters of them involve related research, so there is not much research in this field. Since this century, an increasing number of scholars have begun to attach great importance to the guidance of translation theories of movie titles, which has greatly improved the quality of translation of movie works. The section below presents a few examples. Based on the cognitive principle of relevance theory, Zhou and Dong [2]) take the Golden Rooster Award-winning movies as the research object, and explore the translation of the Chinese movie titles, which is beneficial to the audience to obtain better cognition and understanding about movies, and makes movies more popular with people. In Li's [3] opinion, the English translation of Chinese movie titles should follow the principle of functional equivalence, and translators are supposed to use flexible methods to unify the English translation and the content of movies according to the cultural characteristics and commercial value of the movies. In the article The Translation of English Movie Titles from the Perspective of Reception Aesthetics, Zeng [4] argues that the Chinese translation of the English movie titles must not only be loyal to the content and form of the movie, but also conform to the aesthetic taste of the audience. In a word, many translation theories are used to analyze the translation of movie titles from different perspectives.

### 2.2. Previous Studies on Translation of American Movie Titles and Skopos Theory

According the classification of text types of Katharina Reiss, movie titles can be viewed as an operative text type, which may achieve better commercial value under the guidance of skopos theory. The transmission of the predominant function of the source text is the determining factor by which the target text is judged. As an operative text type, movie titles are supposed to produce the desired response in the target text receivers. The purpose of the translation of movie titles is to attract audience to watch them and stimulate their imagination about the content of movies, therefore, it is suitable to study movie titles from the perspective of skopos theory. In the paper Translation of American Movie Titles from the Perspective of Skopos Theory, Huang [5] points out the importance and characteristics of American movie titles and suggests four methods for the translation of American movie titles, which are transliteration, adaptation, literal translation and free translation. Similarly, in the thesis Translation of American Animated Movie Titles from the Perspective of Skopos Theory, Yao [6] talks about the characteristics of American animated movie titles and three functions of movie titles: information function, aesthetic function and market function, then four methods for translation of animated movie titles, which are similar to the former. There are many other researchers study the translation strategies of American movie titles from the perspective of skopos theory, such as Liu [7] and Cao and Wang [8]. There have been many studies on the skopos theory and the translation of American movie titles, but there are still many aspects worth exploring in this field.

### 2.3. Summary

Although there are many studies relating to skopos theory as well as translation of movie titles, most of them mainly draw their attention on a single part of it. Skopos theory can be used to analyze different translation texts, and the translation of movie titles can also be analyzed with different theories. The key is how to use skopos theory to guide the translation of movie titles, thereby maximizing the commercial value of movies. Different from previous studies on skopos

theory to guide movie title translation, this paper analyzes the title translation of thirty-one American movies that rank in the top 100 box office in mainland China in the year of 2019, discusses the translation methods of these popular American movies, and puts the purpose of translation in an important position in order to better realize the commercial value of movies.

### 3. Skopos Theory

The 1970s and 1980s see a move away from linguistic typologies of translation shifts, and the emergence and flourishing in Germany of a functionalist and communicative approach to the analysis of translation. For example, Hans J. Vermeer puts forward skopos theory, which centers on the purpose of the target texts. "Skopos is the Greek word for 'aim' or 'purpose' and was introduced into translation theory in the 1970s by Vermeer as a technical term for the purpose of a translation and of the action of translating" [9]. Skopos theory emphasizes that the translator should focus on the intended purpose of the translation, and adopt appropriate translation methods and strategies, during which three basic principles should be followed: the skopos rule, the coherence rule and the fidelity rule. Firstly, the target text is determined by its skopos. The purpose of translation determines the process and methods of translation. Secondly, the target text must be interpretable as coherent with the target text receiver's situation [10]. If the target text does not fit the needs of the target text receivers, it is simply not adequate for its purpose. Thirdly, there must be coherence between the target text and the source text or, more specifically, between: (a) the source text information received by the translator; (b) the interpretation the translator makes of this information; (c) the information that is encoded for the target text receivers. Among the three rules, the first rule is paramount. As a result, the translator should first ensure that the target text fulfills the purpose, then make sure the target text is itself coherent and only then see that the target text demonstrates coherence with the source text. According to skopos theory, the same source text can be translated in different ways according to the different purposes of the target text [11]. As a result, knowing why a source target is to be translated and what the function of the target text is important for the translator.

Whether 'anything goes' as long as the purpose of target text is fulfilled is a question that often cause controversy. Christiane Nord takes issue with this. For Nord, while functionality is the most important criterion for a translation, this does not allow the translator absolute licence and translators should take the responsibility towards their partners in translational interaction. "In spite of criticisms, an important advantage of skopos theory is that it allows the possibility that the same text may be translated in different ways depending on the purpose of the target text and on the commission which is given to the translator" [9].

The specific time when the skopos theory entered China is difficult to verify. What can be confirmed is that The Three Translators of the Federal Republic of Germany published by senior translator Gui Qianyuan in 1987 is the earliest article to introduce German functionalist translation theory in China [12]. Besides, in the three translation works of academic papers by Vermeer, Xue Siliang systematically introduces functional theories of translation, which lays a solid foundation for the development of skopos theory in China. Although it is still controversial whether skopos theory is applicable to literary translation, the author believes that it is instructive for the translation of movie titles with clear purposes. The purpose of the translation of movie titles is to attract audience to watch them and stimulate their imagination about the content of movies, therefore, it is suitable to study movie titles from the perspective of skopos theory.

## 4. Analysis on Translation of American Movie Titles

The final purpose of translation of movie titles is to help the audience know about the content of movies and effectively stimulate audience's desire to watch them. The translation methods of thirty-one American movie titles are analyzed from the perspective of skopos theory in this section. According to the movie title translation methods proposed by He [13], among the thirty-one American movies that rank in the top 100 box office in mainland China in the year of 2019, twelve movie titles are translated by free translation, seven movie titles by literal translation, two movies titles by transliteration, six movies titles by other methods, and the remaining four movie titles are translated by comprehensive methods. In the following, some movies are taken as typical examples to analyze different translation methods.

### 4.1. Free Translation

There are two main purposes of free translation. One is to make Chinese audience better understand the content of movies, and the other is to improve the aesthetic effect of the movies. Some American movie titles have unique cultural connotations, and it is difficult to make Chinese audience understand the content of movies well on the basis of maintaining the original form. In this case, free translation is very necessary. Twelve movie titles of the thirty-one American movie titles are translated by free translation, which proves that free translation is a commonly used method of movie title translation. The following is analysis on the method of free translation and some movies. The movie Gemini Man, translated as Shuang Zi Sha Shou (《双子杀手》), tells the story of Henry, an agent of the US Defense Intelligence Agency. When Henry is about to retire, he accidentally hears a major event about state secrets and is chased by a young killer, who is actually Henry's clone. Based on the content of the movie, "man" in the original title is translated as "Sha Shou" (杀手), which is a wonderful free translation, revealing the identity of the protagonist. The meaning of "Shuang Zi" (双子) in the translated title is similar to twins, suggesting that the young killer is a clone of Henry, and triggering audience's various speculations about the relationship between Henry and the young killer.

Another example of free translation is the title translation of movie Midway. Midway, translated as Jue Zhan Zhong Tu Dao (《决战中途岛》), is about an important turning point of the Pacific War in the World War II---Battle of Midway. After this battle, the Japanese navy suffered a major blow, and the strength of the United States maritime increased significantly, thus reversing the situation in the entire Pacific battlefield. Midway originally means in or towards the middle of something. If the original title is literally translated as Zhong Tu (《中途》), the audience will not be able to know about the theme and content of the movie through the title, let alone have a huge viewing interest. In the official Chinese translation, "Jue Zhan" (决战) indicates that the movie is a war movie and "Zhong Tu Dao" (中途岛) reveals the place of war. Therefore, Jue Zhan Zhong Tu Dao (《决战中途岛》) is a good translation because it reveals the theme and content of the movie, stimulating the desire of people to know about the Battle of Midway.

### 4.2. Literal Translation

Literal translation is to preserve the content and form of the original title to the maximum extent according to the characteristics of the source and target languages in the title translation. When the source language and the target language can be functionally coincident, literal translation is the simplest and most effective translation method. Of the thirty-one American movies that rank in the top 100 box office in mainland China in the year of 2019, seven movie titles are translated literally. For example, Bumblebee is translated as Da Huang Feng (《大黄蜂》), Captain Marvel translated as Jing Qi Dui Zhang (《惊奇队长》), Green Book translated as Lu Pi Shu (《绿皮书》), Dark Phoenix translated as Hei Feng Huang (《黑凤凰》), and The Lion King translated as Shi Zi Wang (《狮子王》). The English titles and Chinese translations

are almost identical, and it is relatively easy for Chinese audience to understand these translations. For example, Dark Phoenix, translated as Hei Feng Huang (《黑凤凰》), tells the story of a female member of the X-Men, Jean Grey. She begins to develop incredible powers that corrupt and turn her into a Dark Phoenix, causing the X-Men to decide if her life is worth more than all of humanity. In the history of China, emperors liked to be called dragon and the queens were called phoenix. Therefore, phoenix can be used to refer to women with great power in Chinese culture. In addition, "Hei" (黑) in Chinese has the meaning that someone has gone bad. Through the translation Hei Feng Huang (《黑凤凰》), audience can guess that the movie is about an unusual female, which accords closely with the content of the movie, so the translated name is a good translation, which helps the audience understand the content of the movie.

The translation of The Lion King is another example of literal translation. The movie The Lion King, translated as Shi Zi Wang (《狮子王》) tells the story of the little lion prince Simba, who is accompanied by his friends, experiences the most glorious moment in his life, encounters the most difficult challenges, and finally becomes the king of the forest. Based on the common sense that the lion is the king of all animals, Shi Zi Wang (《狮子王》) is simple and clear, and the content and form of the original title are kept to the greatest extent.

### 4.3. Transliteration

Transliteration is a translation method that uses one language to read and write the pronunciation of words or phrases in another language. Transliteration is used less, but it is indispensable in the title translation. The names of people and places in the movie titles should be transliterated if they are well known to the audience or have important historical and cultural significance. The transliteration retains the rhythm of the original title, attracting a large audience with its rich exotic features. Of the thirty-one American movies that rank in the top 100 box office in mainland China in the year of 2019, only two movie titles are translated by transliteration, namely Aladdin and Shazam. Aladdin, transliterated as A La Ding (《阿拉丁》), tells the romantic encounter between the good and poor Aladdin and the brave Princess Jasmine. With the help of the magic lamp elf who can meet the three wishes of the owner, Aladdin and Princess Jasmine embark on a magical journey to find true love and self. The movie Aladdin is adapted from the cartoon of the same name in the year of 1992 and the protagonist Aladdin is well-known to the audience, so the original transliteration name can play a better promotional effect. Another example of transliteration is the translation of the movie title Shazam. Shazam, transliterated as Lei Ting Sha Zan (《雷霆沙赞》), tells the story that every time 13-year-old Billy shouts the name of Shazam, he is instantly struck by a magical lightning, given the ability of six gods, and transforms into an adult superhero Shazam. Shazam is both the superhero's name and the slogan that Billy shouts when he transforms into the superhero, as a result, Lei Ting Sha Zan (《雷霆沙赞》) is a successful translation of movie title.

### 4.4. Other Methods

When translating the movie titles, it often happens that it is difficult to properly reflect the content of the movies and stimulate the desire of audience to watch movies through free translation, literal translation and transliteration. Under this circumstance, other translation method is needed to achieve the function of original titles. The so-called special translation method is to put aside the form and content of the original movie title, and create a new title based on the content of movie. Of the thirty-one American movies that rank in the top 100 box office in mainland China in the year of 2019, six movie titles are translated by special translation method. For example, Dumbo is translated as Xiao Fei Xiang (《小飞象》), Charlie's Angels translated as Pi Li Jiao Wa (《霹雳娇娃》), and Crawl translated as Ju E Feng Bao (《巨鳄风暴》). These beautiful translated titles vividly reproduce the content of movies. The following

is an example. Abominable, translated as Xue Ren Qi Yuan (《雪人奇缘》), tells the story of Xiaoyi from a prosperous city, who accidentally finds the legendary snowman on the roof, and decides to traverse 3,000 kilometers with her friends A Jun and Peng Peng to escort the snowman back to the hometown Everest. Abominable is an adjective that describes something extremely unpleasant and causing disgust, whose meaning is quite different from the content of the movie Abominable, so the title of the movie is translated as Xue Ren Qi Yuan (《雪人奇缘》) by the special translation method. “Xue Ren” (雪人) reveals the identity of the protagonist and “Qi Yuan” (奇缘) shows the unusual journey of the snowman, so Xue Ren Qi Yuan (《雪人奇缘》) is loved by audience, especially children, making it one of the most popular American movies in mainland China in the year of 2019. To some extent, the special translation method is a creative process. By creating a new movie title, which has great appeal and aesthetic value, translation plays the role of conveying the content of movies.

#### 4.5. Comprehensive Methods

Some movie titles are long or are composed of two parts and the charm of the original titles may not be conveyed through only one translation method. Of the thirty-one American movies that rank in the top 100 box office in mainland China in the year of 2019, four movie titles are translated by comprehensive methods. For example, Fast and Furious: Hobbs & Shaw at the box office of 1.4 billion consists of two parts. “Fast and Furious” is translated as “Su Du Yu Ji Qing” (速度与激情) by free translation, however, according to the plot of the movie, the two names of people “Hobbs & Shaw” in the title is translated as “Te Bie Xing Dong” (特别行动). In addition, three other movies are translated by comprehensive methods of literal translation and transliteration. In the three titles of Godzilla: King of the Monsters, Alita: Battle Angel and Pokémon Detective Pikachu, “Godzilla”, “Alita” and “Pikachu” are respectively translated as “Ge La Si” (哥斯拉), “A Li Ta” (阿丽塔) and “Pi Ka Qiu” (皮卡丘) by transliteration, and “King of the Monsters”, “Battle Angel” and “Detective” are respectively translated as “Guan Shou Zhi Wang” (怪兽之王), “Zhan Dou Tian Shi” (战斗天使) and “Da Zhen Tian” (大侦探) by literal translation. It can be concluded that when translating movie titles, not only one translation method can be adopted, but also two methods can be appropriately combined for longer movie titles.

### 5. Conclusion

With the rapid development of economy and culture, movie has become an important way for entertainment in the daily life of people, and American movies are playing a major role in the movie market of China. There are thirty-one movies ranking in the top 100 box office in mainland China in the year of 2019. The translation of movie titles determines whether movies are popular or not. The purpose of translation of movie titles is to highlight the main content of movies and stimulate audience’s interest in watching movies. What’s more, movie titles should not only reflect cultural values, but also have certain commercial values because movie is a combination of literal and commercial value. This paper appreciates some translations of American movie titles and puts forward five methods for movie title translation. Under the guidance of skopos theory, the translation of movie titles can better convey the content and achieve the commercial purpose. However, due to space limitations, this paper only discusses the translation methods of American movie titles, does not analyze the language features such as the frequent occurrence of four-character phrases in the title translation, hoping this deficiency can be made up in future research.

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