

Differences in the English and Chinese Subtitles for Adapted Works of *Vanity Fair*

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Abstract

More and more foreign literary works have been remade into other forms. *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray's resplendent social satire exposing the greed and corruption raging in England during the turmoil of the Napoleonic wars, brought him immediate acclaim and thus, it has many adapted versions. This paper aims at analyzing the differences in the English and Chinese subtitles for the adapted works of *Vanity Fair* and summarizing the patterns in the translation of subtitles based on the relevant theories.

Keywords

Vanity Fair, Subtitles, Static and Dynamic, Impersonal and Personal, Hypotaxis and Parataxis.

1. Introduction

In recent years, a lot of foreign works have been converted into other forms. As *Vanity Fair* is one of the most representative works during the Victorian period, it has been adapted into a number of films and TV series. The author of this paper notices the differences between the English and Chinese subtitles for the TV series of *Vanity Fair* and intends to make a comparison in the aspect of static and dynamic, impersonal and personal as well as with hypotaxis and parataxis, which are all distinctive features between English and Chinese, aiming at sorting out the translation patterns for adapted works over the process.

2. Selection of Materials

Vanity Fair is a novel written by William Makepeace Thackeray, a British critical writer in the nineteenth century. Based on the lives of two young women, Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley, *Vanity Fair* shows the life of the British upper class in the early 19th century. The author vividly depicts the extravagant and seductive life of the British aristocracy bourgeoisie, revealing the hypocrisy of their pursuit of fame and wealth.

Vanity Fair has been made into films and TV series for many versions in various countries and the subtitles between English and Chinese also present distinct features which worth studying. The author of this paper chooses the materials from the film version of the book, released in 2004, and the 2018 version of TV series made in Britain to analyze the subtitles between English and Chinese as both of them are relatively popular and delicately-produced. Meanwhile, these two versions possess subtitles which reflect the most typical differences.

3. Differences in English and Chinese Subtitles for *Vanity Fair*

In expressing and reflecting the world, English and Chinese have a lot of differences due to cultural divergences and backgrounds. Zheng (2012) points out that differences of thinking modes of English and Chinese manifest in disparities of language phenomena between these two languages [1].

The main differences in the English and Chinese subtitles for *Vanity Fair* lie in the perspective of static and dynamic, impersonal and personal, hypotaxis and parataxis.

3.1. Differences Concerning Static and Dynamic

The character of static and dynamic are considered as a significant factor in the analysis of differences between English and Chinese.

Yin (2008) maintains that Static and dynamic is one of the most important research subjects in contrastive linguistics. It is generally agreed that English is a static-prominent language while Chinese is a dynamic-prominent language [2]. That is to say, English has a natural tendency to use less predicate verbs to express the meaning of action. However, Chinese has a fixed habit of usage to employ a large number of verb forms according to the needs of the sentence.

The static features of English have many aspects of performance. In terms of vocabulary usage, abstract nouns, verb homologs, adverbs, homologous adjectives and prepositions are commonly applied in English to express dynamic meanings. On the other hand, only verb can be used to express the action meaning because of the invisible change of it in Chinese.

This feature appears many times in the English and Chinese subtitles for *Vanity Fair*, seen as the following examples.

Table 1. Bilingual Subtitles Example 1

| | |
|------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| English Subtitle | We are all creatures of modern Britain. |
| Chinese Subtitle | 我们都 生活 在现代英国。 |

In this sentence, the noun “creatures” is replaced with the verb “生活”. A more vivid and more frequently used verb is used to replace the noun in the original sentence, contributing to Chinese audience’s understanding.

Table 2. Bilingual Subtitles Example 2

| | |
|------------------|----------------------------------|
| English Subtitle | Be a friend to them both. |
| Chinese Subtitle | 善待 他俩。 |

“Friend”, a noun, is translated into a verb, “善待”. The word, “Friend”, in the original sentence, contains dynamic meaning. The Chinese translation expresses the meaning in a more concise way.

Table 3. Bilingual Subtitles Example 3

| | |
|------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| English Subtitle | I have a plan for the dashing colonel. |
| Chinese Subtitle | 我想好怎么 对付 这个劲头十足的上校了。 |

In order to convey the meaning correctly, “have a plan for” is understood as “对付”. Actually, it complies with the context and the circumstance of the conversation to show the character’s inner thoughts. Here, it conveys the meaning of “deal with”, “tackle with”, rather than “coming up with an idea”.

Table 4. Bilingual Subtitles Example 4

| | |
|------------------|---------------------------------------|
| English Subtitle | I can't bear the sight of you. |
| Chinese Subtitle | 别让我看到你。 |

The abstract noun “sight” is translated into “看到”. Instead of the previous phrase, it is more vivid, reflecting the dynamicity in the original sentence.

From the above subtitles for the film and TV series of *Vanity Fair*, the translator mainly converts the abstract nouns in English into Chinese verbs. The English nouns employed in the subtitles convey dynamic meaning, but can only be expressed in predicate verbs in Chinese.

3.2. Differences Concerning Impersonal and Personal

Guo (2014) contends that impersonal and personal subject are one of the salient features of the differences between English and Chinese in syntax [3]. It is normally believed that English is impersonal while Chinese is personal, which has a lot to do with the way of thinking between Chinese and the Westerner.

English is commonly regarded as an impersonal language, which means there is no one to describe. Westerners pay attention to objective thinking as in their minds, the natural object is as important as the human subject. Therefore, they tend to make things appear in an objective tone and emphasize on objective consciousness. On the other hand, Chinese people emphasize on subjective thinking, often describe themselves from individuality and people's state. Thus, Chinese is considered as personal.

When English subtitle uses objects as the subject in the sentences, it focuses on the things that are happening to someone while Chinese often uses the expression of personal subject, stressing on the things that are going on with someone. This difference occurs from time to time in the subtitles for *Vanity Fair*.

Table 5. Bilingual Subtitles Example 5

| | |
|------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| English Subtitle | Your place is always the next place. |
| Chinese Subtitle | 你永远都在追求更高的地位。 |
| English Subtitle | Honor demands I must obey my country's call. |
| Chinese Subtitle | 为了荣誉，我必须响应国家的号召。 |
| English Subtitle | Captain Osborne's vanity must make him a tempting victim. |
| Chinese Subtitle | 奥斯本上尉一定会为此吃亏的。 |

From the above sentences, it is not hard to notice the differences between English and Chinese expressions in the subject. The words used in the original English subtitles are some inanimate nouns, such as “place”, “honor” and “vanity”, but they are matched with living verbs and highlight the characteristics of English sentence patterns, focusing only on behavioral results regardless of the subject of the matter.

In comparison, the Chinese subtitles clearly highlight the status of the subject, emphasizing the absolute superiority of the living subjects in the expression of action.

Table 6. Bilingual Subtitles Example 6

| | |
|------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| English Subtitle | It can cling faithfully to a misty memory and cherish a dream. |
| Chinese Subtitle | 你死死抱着虚无缥缈的回忆不放，把梦幻当作宝。 |
| English Subtitle | It matters not what he thinks of me. |
| Chinese Subtitle | 他怎么想我无关紧要。 |

It can be seen from the above examples that the pronoun “it” of English subtitles tends to provide the sentence with an impersonal tendency, but Chinese ones do not have a pronoun in such usage, so Chinese expressions are often personal.

In this way, English is more objective, fair and natural than Chinese while the expression of Chinese subtitles is more subjective.

3.3. Differences Concerning Hypotaxis and Parataxis

The sentence structure of the two languages has obvious differences, which is mainly manifested in the hypotaxis of English and parataxis of Chinese.

Ren (2011) thinks that English and Chinese, belonging to two different language families, have many differences between them, while the most important difference is hypotaxis and parataxis in grammatical structures, which arise from the different thinking models between the east and the west people, the west emphasizing analysis and the east comprehensiveness [4].

Hypotaxis refers to the use of linguistic means, including lexical means and morphological means to display syntactic relations and realize the connection of words and sentences. Parataxis is the opposite of hypotaxis, which indicates that the meaning or logical connection of words or sentences is realized without means of language devices. The former pays attention to the cohesion of the sentence form while the latter focuses on the coherence in the sense of the text.

Lexically parataxis structures are often found in English, and hypotaxis structures are frequently employed in Chinese, which also apply to the subtitles for *Vanity Fair*.

Table 7 Bilingual Subtitles Example 7

| | |
|------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| English Subtitle | We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we carry nothing out. |
| Chinese Subtitle | 我们生不带来，死不带走。 |

The English version focuses on the logical relationship between “brought” and “carry out”. If we translate the sentence word by word, it should be like: “我们没有带任何东西来这个世界，当然我们也不会带任何东西走。” However, the translator omits the word “nothing” and the conjunction “and”. Besides, “生不带来” and “死不带走” parallel with each other neatly, which sounds more elegant and rhymed.

Table 8. Bilingual Subtitles Example 8

| | |
|------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| English Subtitle | So that was school, and this is the world. |
| Chinese Subtitle | 离开了学校，进入了世界。 |

The Chinese subtitle deletes the conjunctions “so” together with “and” to make a paralleled structure by adding two verbs. Such kind of translation confronts with the rules of rhyming in Chinese.

Table 9. Bilingual Subtitles Example 9

| | |
|------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| English Subtitle | Sharp by name, and sharp I fear by nature. |
| Chinese Subtitle | 她名叫夏普，个性也锐利。 |

In the above sentence, the Chinese subtitle omits the translation of the conjunction “and”. Besides, the word order is adjusted to make the sentence more natural and colloquial.

Generally speaking, English subtitles in *Vanity Fair* often use various forms to connect words, sentences or clauses, especially conjunctions. Therefore, English subtitles are more compact and rigorous. Chinese subtitles use less or even without formal connections, focusing on chronological or logical order of affairs, making the structure concise and clear.

4. Conclusion

By analyzing the Chinese and English subtitles for *Vanity Fair*'s adapted works, the differences mainly lie in the aspect of static and dynamic, impersonal and personal, hypotactic and paratactic.

Compared with Chinese, English subtitles prefer to adopt impersonal, static sentences and hypotaxis structures to make the sentences more objective and logical while Chinese ones prefer to use personal, dynamic sentences and parataxis structures to make the sentences elegant and rhythmic.

Such difference not only embodies in the adapted works of *Vanity Fair*, but also occurs in several other literary masterpieces. When translating the subtitles, it is quite significant for the translators to take these aspects into consideration in order to cater to different audience from different cultural backgrounds. Thus, they can better understand the plots and characters of the adapted works.

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