Dubbing from English into Chinese: A case study on translation of spoken language

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Researches on how spoken English is dubbed into other languages in films and TV series have been on the rise over the past 30 years. But they are concerned mainly with the translation of English into European languages and there is scarce mention of any study of Chinese dubbing of spoken English. In this context, this paper investigates how spoken English is dubbed into Chinese with one American film The Devil Wears Prada (2006) and one British film Atonement (2007). By analyzing the dubbed scripts against the scripts of original films, it is found that the dubbed scripts fall short of preserving the overall original orality, for lacking the major spoken features that should be present in the target texts, though one feature, i.e., “the use of incomplete sentences”, is overrepresented. Further studies are needed.

Keywords: orality, film dubbing, spoken English, audiovisual translation

1. Introduction

Dubbing is a process during which “the replacement of the original speech by a voice track which attempts to follow as closely as possible the timing, phrasing and lip-movements of the original dialogue” (Luyken et al. 1991: 31). Dubbing is among other ways to overcome language barriers and the goal of which “is to make the target dialogues look as if they are being uttered by the original actors so that viewers’ enjoyment of foreign products will be enhanced” (Chiaro 2009: 144). It is generally acknowledged that language transfer in European film and television is dominated by two techniques: subtitling and dubbing (Mera 1999: 73). Needless to say, there have been abundant research results on subtitling and dubbing translation.

Researches on dubbing have been focused traditionally on such aspects as synchronization, social and geographic language variations and transfer errors (cf. Delabastita 1989; Herbst 1996; Bostinelli 2002). One major issue that concerns language variations is how spoken language, like dialogues in specific contexts, is appropriately
translated from the source to the target text, and whether the orality in the original film has successfully been preserved during dubbing into another language. And as a matter of fact, we have witnessed a growing interest in orality in translation studies, just as Bandia (2011: 108) points out, which has followed two trajectories, “one is directly related to interlingual translation practice such as interpretation and audiovisual translation”. It is true that orality is one of the prominent features in interlingual oral communication, among which dubbing is a common practice in overcoming language barriers in TV series and films’ localization.

Comparing with subtitling, mirroring spontaneous conversation in dubbing might not seem to be too complicated, spoken linguistic features of fictional dialogues are also transferred using the spoken mode in the target language (Baños and Chaume 2009). However, in the case of dubbing, there are indeed “a large number of very different factors come into play, such as professional, sociocultural and technical ones, as well as language and communication factors, which include their nonverbal dimension” (Zabalbeascoa 1997: 330).

Chaume lists three extra-linguistic and/or non-verbal constraints, i.e., lip synchrony, kinesic synchrony and isochrony (2004: 43-45). Other than extra-linguistic constraints, orality is among the linguistic constraints. Delabastita (1989) and Korloff (2000) have pointed out, if the target film viewers are to be drawn into the fictional world portrayed on the screen, dubbing must preserve the original film dialogues. In other words, the spoken features of the target language must be present in the dubbed film just as the same features of the source language in the original film. Under this circumstance, identifying similarities to the spoken language is necessary for a full understanding of the mechanisms underlying viewer’s acceptance, and, ultimately, for accessing the quality of the translated product (Pavesi 2008).

However, just as stated earlier, most of the existing studies so far are concerned with the translation of English into European language like Italian, German and Spanish (cf. Malinverno 1999; Santiago 2004; Valdeon 2008; Antonini and Chiaro 2008; Pavesi 2009). However, little is known about how spoken English is dubbed into Chinese, though there have been studies that discuss subtitling and dubbing from English into Chinese from the perspective of Western-Chinese cultural and social differences (e.g., Peng 2004; Chen 2007; Xu 2009), and more studies have been found to be much general reviews of the subtitling and dubbing translation in China (cf. Qian 2004; Deng 2016). Some are case studies related to dubbing but not looking at the spoken feature during the translation (cf. Zhao and Chen 2007; Hu 2010; Xi 2015).

In the current study, I examine how spoken English (particularly in dialogues) in the film *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) and *Atonement* (2007) are dubbed into Chinese.