

Creativity in Translating Cartoons from English into Mandarin Chinese

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ABSTRACT

Cartoon translation appears to be a special field in screen translation. It can be argued that when translating cartoons, especially those for children, creativity in use of the target language could be explored, and a certain degree of re-writing of the language in the dialogue could be acceptable, so that strategies should be applied to achieve the effect that the translated version sounds natural, educational and entertaining to the target language audience. This paper examines some aspects of this special field of translation, including ideology issues, domestic culture awareness and the translator's active choice of creative language in their translation, to suggest that approaches such as domestication, or "excessive domestication" as the author of this paper defines, and cultural adaptation provide ways in which translators implement their creativity when translating cartoons. The discussion is exemplified by excerpts from cartoon translation from English into Mandarin Chinese.

KEYWORDS

Screen translation, ideology, creativity, domestication, cartoon, dubbing.

1. Introduction

There seems to be no disagreement on interlingual dubbing for cartoons, especially those targeting child audience, though in the realm of screen translation of live-action films for adults, some countries prefer subtitling while some choose to maintain their tradition of dubbing (Ivarsson and Carroll 1998: 6). It appears to be widely agreed that among all types of screen translation, translation of cartoons is a form that can and perhaps should be realised by dubbing. Even in the subtitling countries, animated programmes aiming at young children are dubbed (Gottlieb 2004: 83). It is self-evident that one of the major reasons why both dubbing countries and subtitling countries choose to dub the translated cartoons rather than subtitle them is that children, the most likely target audience of cartoons, in general, have not developed their reading capacity as fully as most adults have to focus their attention on reading subtitles all through the length of the films. Children do not read subtitles as adults do, especially when watching cartoons, which usually are "action-oriented" films (d'Ydewale et al. 1991 cited in Karamitroglou 2000:118).

Another factor which could justify interlingual dubbing of cartoons is that the dialogue in the original soundtrack of cartoons is dubbed too, though pre-dubbed in most cases, while translated dubbing is a procedure of post-production. So, there is no issue of the 'original voice,' or 原声 (*yuan sheng*) as called in Chinese, in cartoons as in live-action films in which actors, especially well-recognised international stars, have their

identifiable voices heard. The stars' voices may be one of the selling points of the live-action films in the international market as well as at home. For cartoons, the domestic stars' voices in the target language culture might function better to the target language audience than the foreign stars' voices in the original, since foreign stars might not be well recognised only by ear in animations by the target language viewers.

Fodor (1976 cited in *ibid.*: 129) introduced the idea of "character synchrony," indicating that when an individual character's speaking manners, such as "timbre, pitch, intensity and speech tempo" are well-known and recognisable to the audience, synchronisation of the voice and the image should be retained. Such synchrony can be achieved in interlingual dubbing as well as in the original dubbing, if the same character, especially a classic one, is dubbed by the same recognisable target language dubbing actor. For example, when Disney's Donald Duck was first introduced to China in 1980s, the Duck was dubbed in Mandarin Chinese by Li Yang, whose slightly husky voice has established a vocal image of Donald Duck for the Chinese audience even till today. Therefore, interlingual dubbing for cartoons can in certain ways maintain the same artistic level as the original, and can have a better effect on the domestic audience than subtitling.

Translating cartoons, especially those for children, is in a way different from translating films for adults, due to the different functions and features of films for adults and cartoons for children. A greater deal of creativity will be demanded when translating cartoons. This paper tries to demonstrate the necessity and importance of creativity in cartoon translation through examining certain aspects of cartoons and dubbing features. Issues including ideology and creativity in translation, as well as creative language use in dubbing will be discussed.

2. Ideology and creativity in translating cartoons

Ideology can be defined as "the tacit assumptions, beliefs and value systems which are shared collectively by social groups" (Hatim and Mason 1997: 144). According to Oittinen (2006: 37), morality is "a whole range of principles or standards or norms of human conduct aimed at attaining the good." That is usually associated with "happiness and pleasure; duty, virtue and obligation; and a sense of perfection." Morality can be regarded as a category of value system of a society, which, by Hatim and Mason's definition, is a component of ideology. Since there could be difference in defining what 'the good' or 'virtue' is, what 'happiness' or 'pleasure' is, what is or is not our 'duty' or 'obligation,' ideology and moral standard can be different, more or less, in different cultures. Language appears to be one of the devices used to express particular ideology and moral standard. Thus, it can be argued that the language used in the translated version of cartoon dialogues should be different from the original when it comes to the issues of ideology and moral standard.

Since a major amount of cartoons are targeting child audience, and carry certain educational function, it is the film makers' responsibility to convey 'the good' message in the cartoons to the young viewers, by the definition of 'the good' in their own culture. When translating, if this 'the good' in the original is not ideologically or morally good in the target language culture, the message usually will be revised, and the translators' creativity will be required. An example cited by Shavit (1986: 127) states the importance of creativity in translation for children when ideology is involved. When translating Defor's *Robinson Crusoe* into German, the translator created a different image of the character. In Defor's original version, Robinson Crusoe reaches the island with weapons, food and the Bible symbolising the European civilization, and with an intention to cultivate nature. The value of colonialism in the original is contradicted to the value in the theory of education that the translator believed in. Therefore, he changed Robinson Crusoe into a man who arrives at the island without any possessions and even without clothes. Crusoe is not cultivating nature but learning to live in nature. And when translated into Hebrew, further revision was done so as to make it appropriate to the Jewish Enlightenment views of the 19th century. It can be seen from this example that creativity in translation for children for the purpose of making it appropriate to the moral standard and value of the target language culture has been implemented widely. In the United States of America, a country that claims to be the land of freedom, ideology is also an important issue when it comes to children's books and media. Editors will choose those that "conform to American poetics, cultures and values" (Oittinen 2006: 40).

However, translators will find themselves besieged with more constraints when translating animated cartoons than translating printed books for children. Information conveyed by other semiotic systems such as the visual images and acoustic signs in cartoons, which usually function as a support to the understanding of the dialogues, could cause constraints in translation when adaptation and revision are needed. An exiguity of creativity can be performed to change the nature of characters or plot of the story in cartoons. What the translators can mostly do is to manipulate the language in the dialogues, the songs and the narrations. For example, in the beginning of the animated Disney film *Aladdin*, the merchant sings a song on the back of his camel while travelling across the desert. One line in the lyrics of this song, when referring to Arabic culture, is "It's barbaric, but it's home." Using the word "barbaric" to portray a culture is most unlikely acceptable by the value and moral standard of any nation, not by the Chinese mainstream standard at least. Therefore, when translating this line into Chinese, one of the strategies could be to change the word "barbaric," which is an adjective modifying the culture and the people, into "a bit like wilderness," which depicts the land, to subdue and mitigate the harshness of the word "barbaric." The translation could be: 有

些荒凉，但却是家乡 (*youxie huangliang, danque shi jiaxiang*, "It's a bit like wilderness, but it's home"). To be more creative and to make it more suitable for the target Chinese culture, it could be rewritten as "It's ancient, and it's home." 古老的土地，我的家乡 (*gulao de tudi, wode jiaxiang*, "Ancient land, my homeland"). Such translation fits into the notion in the Chinese culture of being proud to be a nation with a heritage of ancient civilisation, and also is coherent with the tale the merchant tells later that appears to happen fictionally in the ancient times. If translated or rewritten in this way, the negative image of Arabic culture that is imposed by the word "barbaric" in the original could be completely eliminated.

Generally speaking, it is not a virtue to distort the image of other countries and cultures, with possible exception when the countries are at war. If a country or a culture is denigrated in a cartoon by another country for any reason, such as during the time when the two are in hostility in which the target language country is not involved, it can be argued that when translating the cartoon, the unfriendliness and disrespect expressed by the language used in the original should be mitigated or eliminated so as to keep children of the target language culture away from the possibility of developing a mentality of unreasonable hostility or prejudice against other cultures. Research has been conducted to demonstrate that children are regarded as "components of protected audience" (Donald 2005: 106). Hence, children's psychological well-being should be taken into consideration when translating cartoons from another culture.

In China, nowadays, ideology and moral standard issues screen translators face are mostly cultural rather than political. Foreign film distributors have realised that it is unwise and indiscreet to try to sell films bearing political offensiveness to the nation of their target market. Through my experience over these years in screening the sample films submitted by foreign distributors, it can be easily seen that such political ideology problems seldom occur in the films they plan to sell in China. However, the cultural issues are always in the focus of attention. Since obviously there are different criteria in different cultures as for, such as, how much nudity, violence, horror, foul language, etc. is acceptable in mainstream media, translators need to bear in mind the criteria in their own culture, and make appropriate manipulation of the original material when translating so as to make the translated version of the films acceptable and even applaudable in their domestic culture. Whenever such manipulation is needed, translators usually work with the producers and/or directors of the dubbed version of the film to decide which scenes should to be edited out in post-production, and afterwards when translating, make necessary changes in the lines before and/or after those scenes that will be cut out to ensure that the story develops coherently when those scenes are missing. This process involves a great deal of creativity.

3. Creative language use in translating cartoons

The creativity discussed above could be called “passive creativity”, since the translators need to use their creativity to hide, delete or change things in the original which appear to be improper in the target language culture. This form of creativity is what has been imposed on translators by the “improperness” in the original films rather than what translators choose to initiate. However, there are areas where translators could use their creativity which is not imposed by the unacceptable cultural elements in the original, but to make the cartoons more educational and/or entertaining for the target language audience.

Unlike subtitling, which is translated from spoken source language to written target language, translation for dubbing is done from spoken to spoken. Apart from the features, such as lip synchrony, kinetic synchrony and isochrony (Chaume 2004: 43), another striking feature of interlingual dubbing is that the language used in translation for dubbing should be “speakable” (Zatlin 2005: 1) or actable. This form of translation is not for the audience to read as with subtitles, but for the dubbing actors to speak and act with their voices, and then for the audience to hear. Therefore, language in the translated dialogue is supposed to be natural to the ears of the target language audience, and at the same time, as true as possible to the meaning of the original. “Naturalness” is defined as “nativelike selection of expression” (Warren 2004 cited in Chaume 2007: 186). In other words, expressions used in translation for dubbing should be as close as possible to the expression the target language audience use in their daily communication and should cause as less unfamiliarity as possible to them. Therefore, dialogue in the translated script should be speakable and colloquial enough for the dubbing actors to utter and for the audience to perceive without causing any awakening effect that may bring the audience out of the illusion that the film creates.

Translation for dubbing often involves the domestication strategy by which the translator tries to remove the elements in the original that appear foreign to the target language audience (Chaume 2007: 213; Ruiz 2007: 219). Translation, in this case, is to replace the elements culturally foreign with what is perceivable to the target language audience (Venuti 1995: 18). The language used in such translation should be the real language for the audience, rather than a foreign language in disguise of the linguistic structure of the target language. Venuti (*ibid.*: 17) also states: “[t]ranslation is a process by which the chain of signifiers that constitutes the source-language text is replaced by a chain of signifiers in the target language which the translator provides on the strength of an interpretation.” In different cultures, the same signifier may introduce different significations, and the same reference may denote different referents. If such difference is not smoothed away in translation, the text in the target language will possibly appear unnatural and awkward to the

target language audience, which will, to some extent, ruin the artist value of the original cinematic works.

In his discussion of norms of translating children's books, Shavit (1986: 112-115) points out that unlike translating for adults, when translating for children, translators are "permitted to manipulate the text in various ways by changing, enlarging, or abridging it or by deleting or adding it," so as to adjust the original text and make it educationally appropriate for the children according to the target language society's standard of values, and to bring the text to the level of children's ability of comprehension. The translated text should relate to the "existing model of the target system." Shavit's norms of translating children's books also apply to translating cartoons for children. However, due to the characteristics of audiovisual medium, screen translators might have less room for their creativity than book translators in the respect of changing the plot. The focus of screen translators' attention to manipulation of the original is mostly on the re-creation of the language in the dialogue. Since dubbing can hide the original text (Ivarsson and Carroll 1998: 36), translators have room for their creativity in terms of language use.

When translating cartoons targeting child audience, such creativity involves a creation that agrees with children's imagination and language mode, so as to make the cartoons more appealing and entertaining to them. It can be justified that the approach of "excessive domestication," which is normally not applicable in translating live-action films, can be used as a strategy of re-creation in cartoon translation. In this paper, excessive domestication, an approach derived from the strategy of domestication, is defined as the way of translation which domesticates the original into the target language culture to an extent that the target language audience might see the translator's effort and creation, and might assume that the expressions used in the translation may not be those used in the original. Excessive domestication from English into Mandarin Chinese means that the translators "abuse" the strategy of domestication so obviously that conscious Chinese audience may wonder if it is possible that the English film writers could have written such Chinese expressions in such a Chinese perspective.

Due to differences between China and the English-speaking world in the respects of history, heritage and language features, etc., the idea that, in dubbed films, foreign actors speak a Chinese dialect which is deeply rooted in a certain sub-culture belonging to a region or a social group in China can hardly be widely accepted. This might be one of the reasons why those foreign films which are distributed nationwide on mainstream media in China are dubbed only in standard Chinese, namely *Putonghua* or Mandarin, and why The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television of China issued regulations stipulating that only *Putonghua* be used in foreign film dubbing (SARFT 2004). Chinese dialects usually conjure up images of certain sub-cultures, geographical or social, or both,

to which the foreign actors on the screen obviously do not belong. If a translation is done in Chinese dialects, especially when different dialects are heard in one film, the images of the characters in the story might lose coherence. The image of a foreign culture depicted by the foreign actors on the screen might be mixed up, or messed up, with the images of a sub-culture or some sub-cultures in China voiced by the dubbing actors. If a translation is excessively domesticated to such an extent, it might have the possibility of depredating the make-believe effect of the film.

Taking geographical dialect as an example, when translating the hostile question "Who are you?!" in *LA Confidential*, said by an angry man popping out of his door and confronting Jack (Kevin Spacey), the police officer who just pulls the man's Christmas decorations off his roof, the standard Mandarin version is supposed to be 你是谁? (*ni shi shei?* "you are who?"), which is an unmarked sentence. It bears less tone of anger than 你谁呀? (*ni shei ya?* "you who ya?", in which "ya" is a question signifier). And *ni shei ya* seems more equivalent to the original especially in manner. But the translator's choice is still *ni shi shei*, since *ni shei ya* sounds too much like Beijing dialect and brings an image of Beijing residents, especially those living in the *Hutongs*, the historical alley areas in Beijing. The utterance of such a dialect-like translation will in some degree ruin the cohesion between the visual image of the character on the screen and the image that the language in the dialogue establishes.

The indiscreet use of social dialects in translation can also cause excessive domestication. For instance, using expressions such as 超(*chao*, "super"), 巨(*ju*, "very"), 爽(*shuang*, "comfortable"), 酷(*ku*, "cool"), 雷(*lei*, "overwhelm, shock"), and neologisms mainly belonging to today's youngsters, will prove to the Chinese audience that the translated dialogues have been manipulated by the translators. Another typical instance illustrating excessive domestication is the translation of English idioms into Chinese idioms. Some concepts could be shared by different cultures, but expressions of the same concepts can be totally different in different cultures and bear distinctive cultural characteristics. A typical example among many is the translation of the expression "speaking of the devil." The equivalent expression in Chinese is 说曹操，曹操到(*shuo Cao Cao, Cao Cao dao*. "Speaking of Cao Cao, Cao Cao just shows up.") The two idioms in English and Chinese express almost exactly the same idea. However, in screen translation for live-action films, it is better not to mention Cao Cao, a historical figure in Chinese ancient history who was born in the 2nd century. It does not seem to be true or it doesn't convince the Chinese audience that, for example, a farmer in England of Victoria's age to use an idiom with the name of Cao Cao in it.

Thus, from the above discussion, it can be seen that excessive domestication will add certain effect to films which the original does not intend to make. Also, it will possibly give the audience an uncomfortable

feeling that they themselves are manipulated by the translator, and the true message of the original might be hidden away from them. Although it can be argued that it is reasonable for translators to manipulate the text, they should not manipulate it to such an extent that it makes the audience feel deceived. However, in cartoon translation, especially those for children, excessive domestication can be an effective approach to increase the entertainment value of the films. Firstly, “[c]ulture is learned, not innate. It derives from one’s social environment...” (Hofstede et al. 2010:6). To learn his or her own culture, one has a “receptive period” of about ten to twelve years in his or her early life (ibid.:9). That is to say, children, especially those under the age of twelve, unlike adults, have not developed complete and strong cultural awareness. Therefore, in terms of language use, they might not be able to tell to which culture a certain expression belongs. What they care most about might be how much of the story they can understand and how much fun they can have watching the cartoon. When language in the dialogue is manipulated creatively or domesticated excessively, it is less likely for child audience to notice and feel deceived. Secondly, unlike live-action films which are acted by real people, cartoons are animated images of people, talking animals and even plants and lifeless objects. There is no such an issue as foreign actors speaking Chinese dialects or culture-specific expressions on the screen. Thirdly, using the language that belongs to children’s social dialect where applicable will potentially curtail the psychological distance between the child audience and the characters on the screen, and make the cartoons more accessible and perceivable to them. Hu and Liu (2008: 14-17) point out that the use of popular Chinese neologisms, which especially belong to youngsters in China today, in the dubbing of *Garfield 2*, Chinese dubbing by Shanghai Film Translation and Production Studio) has been proved to be successful.

The approach of excessive domestication in cartoon translation involves a great deal of creativity, which requires the translators to have sufficient understanding of both English and Mandarin Chinese, and also the Chinese children’s way of expression. For instance, the translation of the line “Garfield? What the devil is a Garfield?” is “加菲? 加菲是什么东东?” (ibid.) (*Jiafei? What a dongdong is Jiafei? “What a thing is Jiafei?”*) In standard Chinese, “thing” is *dongxi*. And *dongdong*, the repetition of the first syllable of the standard word, is a newly coined neological expression popular among youngsters of the Internet generation in China. The use of such expressions in the translation involves the translator’s creativity in choosing the words in Chinese bearing a connotation that the original does not imply.

An area, for another example, in cartoon translation which may require a great deal of creativity is the translation of the names of characters. Usually, English names are transliterated into Chinese with a string of Chinese characters bound together carrying no meaning but a nominal

function to refer to the relevant person. In fictional works, and usually in cartoons, names could bear some meanings which describe the trait and/or personality of the characters. Such names are called charactonyms. The expressive function of charactonyms is more significant than their nominal function (Kalashnikov 2006). For example, the names of some characters in *Transformers*, the classic cartoon series and now a live-action film series, have been creatively rewritten in Chinese, and recognised as the “official” Chinese names of those characters. To list a few as examples, the Chinese name for Megatron is 威震天 (*wei zhen tian*, “power that trembles the sky”), Starscream is 红蜘蛛 (*hong zhizhu*, “red spider”), Thundercracker is 惊天雷 (*jing tian lei*, “sky-rocking thunder”), Skywarp is 闹翻天 (*nao fan tian*, “havoc turning the sky upside down”), Menasor is 飞天虎 (*fei tian hu*, “tiger flying in the sky”), and Bruticus is 混天豹 (*hun tian bao*, “leopard in the turbid sky”). All these names have the connotation of the characters being powerful and awe-inspiring. And all these names bear the characteristics of nicknames of the heroes in Chinese martial art literature, which are usually associated with the power of nature, such as the might of the sky or thunders, the force of tigers or leopards, the horror of the creepy creatures like spiders. The three-syllable structure of the names is very typical of the martial art figures which are deeply rooted in the Chinese culture. Such a creative strategy in translating charactonyms in cartoons makes the names more expressive and descriptive than transliteration. It helps establishing the characters in the story for the Chinese-speaking audience in a similar way the original does for the English-speaking audience.

4. Conclusion

Translating cartoons is a process that involves creativity in a greater degree than translating live-action films. Lefevere (1992: 9) views translation as a type of “rewriting,” the purpose of which is to bring the original works beyond the boundaries of the original culture. This notion applies especially to translating cartoons, considering issues such as ideology, child audience' characteristics, features of dubbing and some traits of the Chinese spoken language.

One of the major differences between live-action films for adults and cartoons for children is that films for adults are what adults produce for adults, while cartoons for children are a form of media culture that adults create for child audience. Although children may be involved in production process of animated films, for instance they may be needed for dubbing the voices of some characters, the whole idea of cartoons ranging from the theme of the story to the character design is usually the adults' creation. The purpose of films for adults, in most cases, is focused on information and entertainment, and/or the sharing of the film writers' and

directors' life experience and emotions, whereas cartoons for children carry more educational function, including the education of culture, history and morality. Since different cultures may have certain differences in value, morality, ideology and the criteria for what is appropriate for children, creativity in translation is needed to make the target language version of cartoons appropriate by the domestic standard. Also, considering the language use in cartoons, when translating cartoons, a degree of creativity is required to make the translated and dubbed version of foreign cartoons an integrated artistic entity, culturally and linguistically, appealing to the audience of the domestic culture.

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Biography



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<http://www.bon.tv/11/62/1103-chinalogue-translation-dubbing-part-1.shtml>

<http://www.bon.tv/11/62/1104-chinalogue-translation-dubbing-part-2.shtml>

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