

# A Multimodal Discourse Analysis on Subtitle Translation of *the Knockout*: A Chinese Political-Themed TV Drama

Liu Wen

**Abstract**—In recent days, more and more Chinese films and TV series including political-themed TV series are aired internationally and have received extensive attention with the improvement of the quality of Chinese audiovisual works. Such political-themed TV works are produced to reflect social realities and include the bulk of political terminology such as official titles and institution names as well as concepts related to newly-mentioned political terms and slogans, which may be quite unfamiliar to foreign audience. Therefore, audiovisual translation and subtitling play an important role in avoiding misunderstanding. Although a striking number of studies on subtitle translation have been made, these analyses appear to emphasize more on the verbal mode instead of different multimodal contexts. Guided by the theory of multimodal discourse analysis, this paper is aimed to analyze the characteristics of the subtitle translation of China's political-themed TV series in terms of content, conversation and social semiotic levels by building a micro-corpus based on the research materials of *the knockout*. This paper will discuss not only the translation of interlingual subtitles for dialogues or monologues, but also that of other captions shown on the screen such as voice-over and images of shop signboards, in order to point out the shortcomings and provide reference for further relevant studies.

**Index Terms**—Micro-corpus, multimodal discourse analysis, political-themed TV series, subtitle translation

## I. INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed the increasing quality of the production of China's TV series, including the political-themed ones reflecting social realities. For example, *the knockout* aired at the beginning of this year is such kind of TV dramas. It tells us about the life and death struggles between justice forces represented by a criminal policeman named An' Xin and local gangs in a span of two decades. It includes stories about the protection towards gang leaders from government officials and dysfunction of national public complaints and proposal administration (national organs which should provide help for the ordinary seeking help by presenting their complaints and corruption issues). Since its broadcast, *the knockout* has received widely acclaim, ranking 9.1 (the full mark is 10) in Douban, a popular audiovisual works-ranking platform. At the same time, many China's films and TV series including *the knockout* with English subtitles can also be watched in other countries through international channels such as IQIYI and YOUKU. However, do these subtitles accurately express what the audiovisual works reveal? This paper will discuss the quality of the subtitle translation of *the knockout* by building a micro-corpus from the perspective of multimodal discourse analysis.

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Liu Wen is with Kashi University, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, China. E-mail: liuwen8808@ksu.edu.cn

## II. THE DEFINITION OF SUBTITLE TRANSLATION AND ITS RESEARCH STATUS

Subtitling can be dated back to the beginning of last century. At first, it serves for the deaf and hard-of-hearing persons to enjoy programs, but later it has become a popular means for the public. Especially with the emergence and expansion of digital modes such as DVD, subtitling has experienced a rapid development later [1–3]. Many scholars have made the definition on subtitling. Generally, it can be classified into two kinds: broad sense and narrow sense. Broadly speaking, subtitling refers to a discipline that is much more than mere transfer of pictures, music, sounds and other non-verbal elements are also involved in the process, making it a kind of multi-semiotic transfer [4]; narrowly speaking, subtitling is the presentation of a translation dialogue in a film in the form of caption usually placed at the bottom of the picture or on the screen [5].

An increasing amount of studies on Audiovisual Translation (AVT) with a focus on subtitling have shown diversified trends, such as cross-cultural reception of interlingual subtitles [6, 7]; studies on ideological manipulation through audiovisual translation [2]; studies on non-professional translators in the circulation of media content, that is amateur subtitlers, including their legality, ethics or unique characteristics [8, 9]; ways of assessing the quality of subtitles [10]; using interlingual subtitling as an important way for second language acquisition [11]; strategies on interlingual subtitle translation, including how to translate humor, taboo, compliments and the like [12–14]; analyses on subtitle translation through multimodal approaches [15, 16]; advice on the trend of AVT development due to current challenges and existent problems [17, 18].

These studies mostly focus on the verbal mode of subtitle translation and pay little attention to different multimodal contexts. However, subtitling can be either the written translation (interlingual subtitling) or a condensed transcription (intralingual subtitling) of the original spoken language [9]. Furthermore, in the field of subtitle translation, “speech act is in focus; verbal intentions and visual effects are more important than atomized lexical elements” [19]. Therefore, subtitle translation is more than translation linguistically. Guided by the theory of multimodal discourse analysis, this paper will analyze not only the speech act of the subtitle translation of *the knockout*, but also its other modal elements shown such as street names, official titles, file names and signboards.

## III. METHODOLOGY

The research is made by building a micro-corpus. Firstly,

39 episodes of *the knockout* with Chinese subtitles and English ones are downloaded or recorded correspondingly. Then, both the Chinese and English subtitles including voice-over and images not shown at the bottom of the screen are extracted by using the software of “Recording with multiple functions” (录音啦超多功能) which can be purchased through Taobao, a Chinese online shopping platform and saved in Excel. Thirdly, the Chinese and English subtitles of each episode are combined into one Excel and the researcher has proofread them piece by piece to gain a micro-corpus about the bilingual subtitles of *the knockout* named as Excel 1. Besides, non-traditional subtitles such as voice-over and explanatory images on screen margins are remarked in the last column of Excel 1. And then the next step is to import Excel 1 into Tmxmall and extract terms to obtain a terminology bank named as Excel 2.

#### IV. A CASE STUDY BASED ON MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

##### A. Research Theory

Multimodal discourse refers to making communication in multiple means or semiotic resource including language, images, voice, movement and the like through multiple senses such as auditory sense, visual sense and the sense of touch [20]. It is a relatively new concept with a focus on multimodalities. It has received attention since linguists brought it into the field of teaching in 1990s and then enjoys a very rapid development. Various aspects such as layout, genre and style are chosen to do multimodal discourse analysis. However, though researchers are keen on studies of multimodal discourse analysis, its importance can never be too noticeable. In today's new media age where culture diversity dominates, using only one type of modality in most cases is inadequate to express the meaning of a discourse, which requires other types of modalities to make the meaning much clearer. The communicative function of the discourse will be realized by the joint effort of both verbal information and non-verbal information. This theory of multimodal discourse analysis involves in studies on both linguistic systems and non-linguistic media systems. Based on System-Functional Linguistics (SFL), its theoretical framework can be divided into five aspects, that is culture, context, meaning, form and media [20]. In subtitle translation of film texts, semiotic modes can be classified into the visual mode and the audio mode. Traditionally, the latter is commonly discussed in terms of dialogues from the perspective of culture, context or meaning. It also includes the forms of monologues, voice-over and sound effects which are seldom explored by scholars. The former draws less attention than the latter. It is usually represented in written forms and images such as signboards, file names and explanation towards official names, which are social semiotic levels and belong to the form and media levels. In this paper, the case study about multimodal discourse analysis will be conducted in terms of content analysis, conversation analysis, and social semiotic analysis.

##### B. A Case Study of the Knockout

Given the theory, this paper is intended to make the analysis of subtitle translation in terms of content,

conversation and social semiotic levels.

##### 1) On the content level

The content analysis focuses on monologues or voice-over based on the remarks of Excel 1, which are usually shown at the beginning or in the end of the episodes. For example, at the beginning of episode 1, there is a sentence by voice-over: “自扫黑除恶专项斗争开展以来, 我省共打掉涉黑组织三百二十二个, 打掉涉恶犯罪集团”. The translation is that “Ever since the special campaign of national crackdown on gang crimes was launched, our provincial officers has rooted out 322 gangland-related groups and 1275 criminal gangs”. There are two obvious mistakes about the above translation. One is a spelling mistake. “lanuched” should be “launched”. Another is a grammar mistake. The subject “officers” is followed by the predicate part “has rooted out” which should be “have rooted out”. Based on Excel 1, there are 36,211 pieces of titles in total. By the machine error identifier, 1,819 of them contain spelling or grammar mistakes. That is to say, about 5% error rate should be avoided. It is worth to mentioning that most of these errors appear at the monologues or voice-over parts. This is perhaps because compared with dialogues, the language used in monologues or voice-over is much more formal.

In addition, apart from spelling and grammar mistakes, there are other errors such as non-equivalence between dialogue and subtitles and false sense, which require manual identification. Quality in translation and interpreting is a complex construct that has triggered many scholarly discussions over the past decades [10]. In the audiovisual works which aim to impress international viewers, the quality of subtitle translation is also of significance. Such kind of mistakes would affect audience's viewing experience or even make them question the production quality of the TV drama itself. One solution to these issues is to improve the quality of subtitlers and also raise their awareness towards subtitle translation. More often, it is people's carelessness that makes mistakes instead of their capacity. Meanwhile, more efforts should be made by relevant departments to supervise and control the subtitle translation of films and TV dramas to be aired internationally.

##### 2) On the conversation level

The conversation analysis centers on dialogues of the TV drama. They are usually represented at the bottom of the images, which is the main part as well as the traditional way of analyzing subtitles. Reference [5] in *The Power of Film Translation* indicates that subtitling, i.e., supplying a translation of the spoken source language dialogue into the target language in the form of synchronised captions, usually at the bottom of the screen, is the form that alters the source text to the least possible extent and enables the target audience to experience the foreign and be aware of its “foreignness” at all times. In accordance with the word frequency of Excel 2, the high frequency terms will be analyzed.

For instance, the term of “保护伞” is mentioned for four times in the TV drama, all are translated into “protective umbrella”. In fact, there are many alternative expressions about protective umbrella. By using free translation, other expressions such as “protection, shelter and safety net” can be chosen in accordance with contexts.

“拔出萝卜带出泥” is another high-frequency phrase and translated into “Let's pull up the turnip out of the mud”. However, if we use the back translation method to translate the English version, we will find that there is no sign of “带出泥”. In the TV series, a supervisor who was assigned to investigate local “protective umbrella” issues mentioned this proverb. It actually means that by looking into one person, all involved are uncovered. Therefore, two ways of translation can be used. One is to translate the meaning behind it, that is, “by investing him, we can finally root out all of those connected with crimes”. Another is that by using free translation, the proverb can be translated into “pull one hair and move the whole body”.

Another example is towards the translation of “中央八项规定”. It was translated into “the Eight-point Regulation of the Centre”. Without showing any substantial content, it makes foreign audience feel confused. Actually, “中央八项规定” is about keeping closer links with the public by improving the working style of the Communist Party of China (CPC), especially banning official extravagance. However, detailed explanation about this term will not meet the standard of subtitle translation as audience do not have time to savor it. Due to time and space limitation, subtitle translators often use the deduction method [12]. In practice, this method can be divided into condensation meaning translating the gist, reductive paraphrasing, that is, using short sentences to translate the source language and deletion. To better translate this political term, a compromised method is to generalize its gist by translating it into “the CPC's eight-point frugality code”. When it comes to the strategies of subtitle translation, numerous scholars have made relevant studies. However, most of them focus on the linguistic level and ignore the manipulative force which usually expresses through dialogues. Reference [2] mentions reduction of the source text is called upon as a necessary manipulative force, not so much as the result of a political or moral decision triggered by some agencies, but rather as an imperative solution used to cope with certain technical constraints and with the nature of the text in its migration from oral to written language. Therefore, subtitle translation is such a subtle job that demands both the translators' linguistic capacity, solid background knowledge and meticulous attitude.

### 3) On the social semiotic level

The social semiotic analysis pays attention to file names, signboard names, explanation of official titles and the like, which belong to non-lingual media forms. With the development of digital products, the power of social images should not be ignored. Reference [2] reveals that media sociologists have turned their attention to the involvement of creative citizen consumers in the production and distribution of media content – including the implications of these participatory practices for the socioeconomic status of media professionals; but for all the emphasis on the increasingly global scope of media flows, the contribution of translation to the reception of broadcasts across different locales remains underexplored. As an important part shown on the screen, the subtitle translation of social images deserves careful research.

“谦和堂” is the name of a private room or a parlor of a restaurant. The image is shown when the main character Gao Qiqiang has lunch in it. It is translated into “Hall of Humility

and Harmony” by using the method of literal translation. However, this translation is inappropriate. First, in accordance with the dictionary by Merriam-Webster, the definition of hall is “the entrance room of a building”. Moreover, as for the name of signboards within a restaurant, usually the word of parlor, room or hall does not need to show. Instead, the implied signified such as rose is enough. Therefore, the subtitle translation of “谦和堂” can just denote “Humility and Harmony”.

The official title “省纪委监委” was translated into “the Provincial Commission for Discipline Inspection” which fails to express the concept of “监委”. Another example is that the subtitle translation of “政协副主席龚开疆” is “vice chairman of political advisory body Gong Kaijiang”. In this phrase, “政协” is short for “政治协商会议” (the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), which is a political term unique to China. The English versions of such political terms have long been established by usage and therefore it is inappropriate to translate them according to one's own expressions. In fact, translating official titles has always been a difficulty in cross-cultural communication. In order to accurately convey the meaning of titles, subtitle translators need to first figure out their original meaning and then translate into English versions rather than just translate their literal meanings by using online dictionary. To better translate Chinese official titles, one can build a terminology bank.

In one episode, the cover of a file printed the characters of “干部履历” was translated into “cadre resume”. Although subtitle translators are increasingly aware of translating non-lingual factors, the usage of some translation should keep pace with the times. Cadre mainly refers to military officers. Nowadays, translators in China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration have long abandoned to use “cadre” to express “干部” and instead the word “officers” is chosen. In subtitling, as “the image has an impact on film translation since it complements and/or clarifies the meaning of the speech act in the frame” [1], to well translate the images shown on the screen is also important for views' understanding.

## V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The multimodal discourse analysis of *the knockout* shows that subtitle translators have translated not only the narrow-sense caption shown at the bottom of the screen, usually about dialogues, but also other multi-semiotic factors such as voice-over and signboards, which is a promising and encouraging sign in the study of subtitle translation. However, the quality of such subtitle translation needs to be improved, especially for translating the subtitles of political-themed audiovisual work from Chinese to English, as “the process of translating from dialogue to subtitles is undoubtedly a challenging endeavor and it is likely that the various obstacles impeding accuracy are not apparent to the average viewer” [17]. There are pieces of advice. Firstly, subtitle translators should solid their language skills to avoid making linguistic mistakes on spelling or grammar. Moreover, about political terms, the method of using online translation websites such as youdao is not advisable and one should find out the exact meaning of

the original terms before translating them into English. To build a bilingual terminology bank can be very helpful. Meanwhile, apart from literal translation, diversified translation strategies such as free translation and connotation and denotation of a word should be considered. More importantly, subtitle translators should use up-to-date vocabulary and expressions to close the distance between foreign audience by reading authentic bilingual readings. And it is also vital to make subtitle translators realize the importance of subtitle translation. In doing so, the production side of subtitling should offer them sufficient time and finance. In the long run, the work of subtitle translation will be cherished. Besides, efforts should be made by relevant departments to strengthen supervision on political-themed audiovisual work to be aired internationally.

#### VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends future research by using the corpus analysis. This can be achieved through expanding research materials such as TV dramas of the same genre and then transcribing them, which would offer more solid and reliable support to the research result. Moreover, It also recommends a comparative study between subtitle translation of Chinese films and TV series and the authentic British or American ones such as the American Movie Corpus (AMC) so as to find out their difference and further improve the quality of the subtitle translation of Chinese audiovisual works.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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