

Review Article

## Exploring the English-Chinese Subtitling Translation in Green Book from the Perspective of Register Theory

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**Abstract:** One of the powerful trends in developing contemporary translation theories is to employ linguistic theories to settle translation problems. Register is an important theory in Systemic-Functional Grammar, characterized by three main dimensions of variation, namely field, tenor and mode. Subtitling translation is one of the most frequently used devices of audiovisual translation. Due to the differences between English and Chinese, the accuracy and appropriacy of subtitling translation are essential to cultural comprehension and interaction in the English movies. This paper attempts to originally explore the expressions of the three areas in the subtitling translation in the movie *Green book* and demonstrate the instructional role of register theory on movie subtitling translation. Through the analysis, a better cultural understanding of subtitling translation in foreign movies within the framework of register is available and further implications on cross-cultural translation from the standpoint of linguistics can be reached.

**Keywords:** Register Theory; E-C Translation; Subtitling Translation; Green Book.

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## INTRODUCTION TO SUBTITLING TRANSLATION

Subtitling translation is an emerging field of translation throughout the world. In general, dubbing and subtitling translation are the most frequently seen strategies in audiovisual translation. Dubbing acoustically supplements the original language in the movie, while subtitling translation visually complements the presentation of movie information. The former is often referred to as a dubbed movie, and the latter is generally called a subtitled movie. However, the film and television works with subtitling translation are preferred because they enable audience to not only grasp the maximum amount of information in a short period of time, but appreciate the original style. Therefore, as an integral part of audiovisual translation, the subtitling translation is particularly important.

Subtitling translation of a movie usually refers to an explanatory expression of the dialogue between the characters and other related information in the movie in the form of the target language. From the perspective of linguistics, subtitling translation can be divided into intra-lingual subtitling and inter-lingual subtitling. Intra-lingual subtitling translation needn't convert one language into another, but converts what is

said into text, while inter-lingual subtitling translation is the process of translating a source language into a target language presupposed by preserving the original soundtrack. The so-called subtitling translation belongs to the inter-lingual subtitling translation.

For subtitling translation, both literal translation and liberal translation must be centered on the audience. Literal translation can mirror foreign cultures while liberal translation is more acceptable to the target audience (Yang, 2006). Thus, subtitling translation must take into account the audience's language proficiency and the education they have received, focus on the target audience and adopt the appropriate translation strategy. Additionally, the relationship between the culture of a source language and that of a target language is required to be handled flexibly. As a means of cultural exchange, translation's purpose is to promote the exchange of different cultures and bridge the cultural gap.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Register, as an integral part of systemic functional linguistics, represents a major topic frequently discussed by systemic functional linguists. Register, firstly put forward by Reid in 1956, is tremendously developed by Halliday. It is originated

from contextualism in England. The anthropologist Malinowski, known as the founder of functionalism, raised the notion of “context in situation” and “context in culture” in 1930s. Subsequently, Firth, greatly influenced by Malinowski as cofounder of functionalism, borrowed the term “context of situation” from Malinowski but redefined it in a more abstract term as “schematic construct” abstracted from the flux of experience and from concrete instances of language use. A precursor of the notion of register in Firth’s approach is what Firth referred to as a restricted language (Shore, 2015). In the 1960s, Halliday inherited and developed the context theory of Firth. He proposed three relevant variables in the situational context of a text to account for variation within and across registers: the field of discourse “what is going on”, the tenor of discourse “the relationships between the interactants”, and the mode of discourse “the role being played by language” (Halliday 1978; 1985; see also Gregory & Carroll 1978). A further discussion on Halliday’s register theory was made by Martin and Leckie-Tarry in 1990s. In the studies, Martin emphasized the social nature of the three variables in register, and employed the combination of register and genre to analyze discourse; Leckie-Tarry underlined the role of field and further made dynamic analysis on the mutual interaction among the three variables (Wang, 2000).

Broadly speaking, language varies to the situation in which it is used, and these varieties of language can be called registers. Concerning the academic definition of register, what is currently generally accepted is the one defined by Halliday and Hasan: variation according to use, that is, we typically use certain recognizable configurations of linguistic resources in certain contexts (Zhang, 1987). A key feature of the theory is to explore the language placed in a specific context and further understand the register by the combination of ideational meaning, interpersonal meaning and textual meaning for interpretation (Zhu, 2019).

A framework of register theory is defined by the three variables—field, tenor and mode. Field of discourse refers both to the nature of the socio-semiotic activity in which the text is playing a part and to the meanings that are maintained and shaped in the activity, and Halliday further distinguishes between first and second order field: (1) the activity itself and (2) the kinds of (experiential) meaning that are involved (Shore, 2015). Besides, field describes what is being talked and stresses the social activity the participants are engaged in, including the topic, technical or everyday. Field determines experiential meaning and in return is reflected in experiential meaning. Tenor of discourse refers to the relevant participants and their roles and statuses: for example, whether the roles are symmetrical or not, whether one participant has an institutional role, how long the participants have known

each other (Shore, 2015). It focuses on the interactants involved in the communication and the relationship between them. There is also a distinction between first and second order tenor. First order tenor refers to the social roles, e.g. teacher and students in a class, parents and children in a family. Second order tenor refers to the linguistic roles, e.g. questioner and answerer, writer and reader. Tenor determines interpersonal meaning and in return is reflected in interpersonal meaning. The last variable, mode of discourse, refers to how language functions in the situations in which it is used. In other words, it serves as the channel of communication, involving simple or complex, formal or informal, written or spoken. In addition, rhetoric mode is also included, such as whether the discourse is argumentative, didactic, entertaining and so on (Shore, 2015). Mode determines textual meaning and in return is reflected in textual meaning.

## ANALYSIS OF THE SUBTITLING TRANSLATION IN *GREEN BOOK* FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF REGISTER THEORY

*Green Book* is a feature film directed by Peter Farrelly, starred by Viggo Mortensen and Mahershala Ali. Based on real stories, the film tells a friendship story between a white driver Tony and a black pianist Ton during their tour from New York all the way south according to the guidelines of a *Green Book*, whose full name is *Negro Motorist Green Book*, a book which provides detailed information of several hotels and restaurants in the south for black people. In the following part, the subtitling translation in *Green Book* will be analyzed from the perspectives of field equivalence, tenor equivalence and mode equivalence with examples.

### Field Equivalence

Field refers to the activities or events that interactants are engaged in. It is composed of a number of factors including language activities and the topic of the activities. The nature of communication is restricted by field, and the scope of discourse is also determined by field. In addition, field can also have a certain influence on the choice of vocabulary and language structure. The field embodied in subtitling translation refers to the topic that the character talks about when communicating (Cao, 2012). The definition of field in the subtitling translation of English films should be based on the topic of the source language, and reflect the principle of equivalence. There are numerous examples which can prove this in the movie *Green Book*.

### Example 1:

Gio’s friend: Who had the balls(胆子) to clip Gio’s hat?

Tony: Don't worry about it. I took care of him(我已经解决他了).

At the very beginning of the film, Tony play petty tricks to impress the wealthy man Gio by getting his precious hat back. This dialogue is what Tony said when he sent the hat back. Against the context, the sentence "I took care of him" can't be translated literally. Here it means "I have given him a beat". The field of Chinese translation "我已经解决他了" is just equal to that of the source language so that it can be understandable to audience.

Example 2:

Tony's brother: He had a great job at the sanitation department. You shouldn't have punched out the foreman.

Tony: He shouldn't have woken me up.

Tony's brother: That's Tony (确实是你的作风).

The family of tony is having a dinner. Tony has to look for another job because the club he has worked is closed for renovation. Tony's brother believes his losing the job in the sanitation department is pitiful. Tony just provided an excuse for that, which can be actually ascribed to his disposition. Here "that's Tony" can't be considered as the original meaning; it means "that's typical of Tony to do this" instead, which is equal to "确实是你的作风" in Chinese, leading to field equivalence in both source language and target language.

The examples like "Watch out for them Krauts. They are all snakes. (小心那些德国佬, 他们坏得很)" "Why you breaking my balls? (你找我茬干什么?)" are also convincing for field equivalence.

### Tenor Equivalence

Tenor refers to the relationship between the participants of the discourse, including the social status and attitude of the participants as well as the role relationship between them (Zhang, 1987). The characteristics of tenor will also vary with the interactive activities between the interactants. Besides, the tone and modality reflected in the interactive language will change accordingly. The more formal wordings are used in the dialogues, the greater the social distance between the participants in the communication. The following dialogues between different characters are to indicate the relationship between the characters as well as the changes in tone and modality caused by different roles in order to achieve the equivalence of tenor. Here are just three examples to be listed for the limitation of space.

#### Example 1:

Ton: Have you ever driven professionally before? (你以前当过职业司机吗?)

Tony: Sanitation. Garbage trucks. Plus I drive my boss home at night. But I can drive anything. Limos, tow trucks, snow palm, whatever. (在环卫局开垃圾清运车, 加上夜里送老板回家, 我什么车都能开, 豪华车、大拖车、铲雪车都行。)

Ton: Well, I'm not a medical doctor. I'm a musician...I'm about to embark on a concert tour, the majority of which will be down South...Do you foresee any issues in working for a black man? (首先, 我不是医生, 我是个音乐家...我即将启程去巡回演出, 主要演出地点在南方...你想过为黑人工作有什么问题吗?)

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Ton: You've impressed several people with your innate ability to handle trouble. And that is why I called and inquired about your availability. (你给他们印象最深的就是与生俱来的解决能力, 所以我才打电话询问你能否来任职。)

The dialogues above occur when Tony comes up for interview to get the driver job. Based on the fact that Tony is as an interviewee and Don as an interviewer, the dialogues are formal and the wording is elegant, such as professionally, foresee any issues, availability and so on.

#### Example 2:

Tony's wife: You better be home for Christmas or don't come at all! (你圣诞必须回家, 不然就永远别回来了。)

This is what Tony's wife says when Tony embarks on the tour to the deep South. It is obvious that Tony's wife is desperate for Tony's coming back on Christmas with overstatement. Tony won't believe it because their relationship is so close and what his wife says is just a joke.

#### Example 3:

Tony: When I was in the army, I knew a guy from Pittsburgh, except he called it Tits-burgh. He said all the women there have huge **tits**.

Ton: That's absurd. Why would women in Pittsburgh have larger **breasts** than, say, women in New York?

In spite of the same thing Tony and Don talk about, they use different words—breast and tit. One is generally called and the other is less formal as slang. From this, it can be concluded that Tony is an uneducated bodyguard while Ton have received a good education in terms of social status.

### Mode Equivalence

Mode refers to the channel or medium of language communication, which can be further divided into written and spoken, formal and informal, simple or complex. The interactants choose the most appropriate expression according to the specific content and communication intentions to be expressed. In the movie there are a multitude of examples to prove mode equivalence, several examples to be listed for the limitation of space.

#### Example 1:

Tony: What the hell you weigh?

Fat Paulie: 260.

Tony's friend: Your left ass weighs two sixty.

Fat Paulie: May my mother-in-law drop dead on the spot if I'm lying.

Tony: All right. You're up. (好吧, 我应战)

Tony's friend: Pick it up! The baby elephant just hit nineteen. (那个死胖子才吃 19 个)... You are embarrassing your son. He's killing you. (你输的话会使你儿子抬不起头, 他会恨死你的。)

From the dialogues what can be seen is a hamburger game between Tony and Fat Paulie, so the language is informal, understandable and simple.

#### Example 2 :

The distance between us is breaking my spirit. My time and experiences without you are meaningless to me. Falling in love with you was the easiest thing I have ever done.

This is a polished letter from Tony with the help of Ton. It is as a result of the form of the letter that the wording is elegant and poetic. With deep love for his wife, Ton expresses the feelings more delicately in the letter. The written language can perfectly convey innermost emotions of Tony after being parted from his wife for so long time.

What's more, the informal expressions such as "take a leak (撒尿)", "piss my pants (尿裤子)" and "Nah (才不)" also reflect the mode equivalence.

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## CONCLUSION

Accurate subtitling translation entails the equivalence of register, that is, field equivalence, tenor equivalence and mode equivalence. Therefore, when translating movie subtitles, it is necessary to fully analyze the topic of the interactive activities, the social relationship between the participants, the formality of the language as well as the tone and attitude of the interactants for the audience-centered translation.

What deserves special attention is the cultural parts involved in the film should be properly handled. In short, register theory not only provides a guiding role in the practice of movie subtitling translation, but offers a novel research perspective for the study of E-C subtitling translation.

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