On the treason in English film title translation

ZHANG Yu-ou, SHI Jin-hai
(College of Foreign Languages, Tianjin Polytechnic University, Tianjin 300387, China)

Abstract: Treason is the objective and inevitable phenomenon in film title translation. With the aid of functional theory, the authors attempt to have a thorough study on the treason in film title translation from four aspects: the types, the manifestations, the causes and the effects, in the purpose of improving the quality of film title translation, and arousing the academic attention on the inevitable phenomenon, treason, which was often regarded as the taboo in translation.

Key words: film title translation; treason; functional theory

1. Significance of the study

Film, a popular art form with both artistic and commercial values, is one of the most influential mass media in the world today. With the cultural communication between China and other countries, more and more English films are introduced into China. Therefore, film translation becomes necessary and important.

Film title is the indispensable, significant and special part of the film. It is the product of culture, business and art. It is the product of the culture, since it was born with the cultural feature of the region where the film is produced and it contains abundant cultural elements, such as slang, idioms, poems, popular songs, historical events, and so on. The title is the trademark and the business card of the film. It plays an important role in attracting the audience to the cinema. In this sense, the title is an influential element in the film’s box office. Therefore, film title is the product of business. Furthermore, film title is the product of the art. It provides the audience with the aesthetic enjoyment by using the rhetoric devices.

Film title translation is not an easy and simple task, but a complicated and creative work. However, due to various reasons, film title translation did not receive enough academic concern. Without systematic and feasible principle, film title translation remains a problematic issue in practice.

As a filmgoer, the authors attempt to have a study on film title translation and find that a lot of translated titles are not faithful to the original ones, and many of them enjoy high prestige among the audience, such as for Waterloo Bridge vs. , for Ghost, for Rebecca, for Matrix, etc.. Comparing the translations with treason and the literal translation: vs. , , , it is clear that the versions with treason are more acceptable and attractive than the faithful translations. Therefore, the treason in film title translation deserves our attention to have a research.

2. Definition of the treason in film title translation

ZHANG Yu-ou, female, postgraduate of College of Foreign Languages, Tianjin Polytechnic University; research fields: translation and translation theory, foreign languages teaching, linguistics.

SHI Jin-hai, male, professor of College of Foreign Languages, Tianjin Polytechnic University; research field: translation and translation theory.
On the treason in English film title translation

The term “treason” in translation was first put forward by Robert Escarpit, a French literary sociologist. In his article Creative Treason as Key to Literature, he holds that “creative treason” is an inevitable phenomenon in translation (Robert Escarpit, 1973). Professor XIE Tian-zhe introduced the term “creative treason” into China with his article On Creative Treason in Literary Translation in 1992. According to professor XIE, creative is a kind of subjective effort made by the translators who using his creative ability to represent the original text, and treason is the objective deviation occurring in the translation progress made by the translator to serve some subjective purpose.

Based on the research of the scholars, “treason”, in this article, is defined by the authors as an objective and inevitable phenomenon in film title translation and it refers to any kinds of deviations, which occur in translation from the original text in form, content, language or in style.

3. Types of treason in film title translation

Treason in film title translation can be classified into unconscious and conscious treason due to the consciousness of the translators.

3.1 Unconscious treason

Unconscious treason may be caused by the translators’ oversight and misunderstanding of the original text, or by his inadequacy of knowledge and personal attainments. Actually, unconscious treason will cause mistranslation, since it occurs if the translators misunderstanding the original title. Unconscious treason can be sub classified into input related and out put related unconscious treason.

Input-related unconscious treason largely refers to mistranslation caused by the translators’ carelessness or his shallow understanding of the film’s content. For example, Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf is translated into ທໍ໌໋ໍ, since the translators mistake Woolf for a wolf. From the example, we can see that the inadequate version has nothing to do with the film and the original title, and it will cause confusion of the audiences. As a result, it will downgrade the film’s charm and affect the box office.

Output-related unconscious treason results from the improper translation strategies employed by the translators when they reproduce the target text. Some translated versions are transferred word by word from the original, and it seems to be faithful in form. However, it betrays the real meaning of the original title. The following example may give readers a demonstration of this phenomenon.

The film title Cat on a Hot Tin Roof was once literally translated into ໄ ຄ ນ ບ ປ ດ ດ, The film describes how Blake, the little son of a rich landlord, found his love of the world and confidence in life with the help of his clever wife, and began to inherit his due part of father’s heritage. Judging from the content, we can see that this film has nothing to do with “cat” and this literal translation will certainly cause the audiences’ confusion. In fact, in English, “cat on a hot tin roof” is an idiom which means that someone is “very agitated or anxious”. In this sense, ທ ຝ ຝ ຝ ຝ ຝ or ທ ຝ ຝ ຝ ຝ may be better than the literal translation.

It is clear that the unconscious treason occurs due to the translators’ carelessness and incompetence, and in the film title translation, it will mislead the audiences and the original film title so as to affect the box office of the film in the target language market. Therefore, it should be eliminated in the process of translation.

3.2 Conscious treason

Different from the unexpected and unnoticed unconscious treason, conscious treason is the translators’ conscious and active act for a certain purpose. To put it in another way, the translators consciously and
deliberately deviate from the original work in terms of form and content so that the translated version can serve a specific purpose and perform an intended function in the target culture. Conscious treason can be divided into non-alternative and alternative conscious treason.

Non-alternative conscious treason signifies that though the translators do not want to deviate from the original, however, due to the influence of some external factors, such as language, culture, authoritative factors, or the ambiguity of the original, the translators have to be unfaithful to the original. Such a treasonous phenomenon can sometimes be seen in film title translation.

Take the film *Salt of the Earth*, for example, if it is faithfully translated into 盐, the audiences will mistake it for a science and education film. As a matter of fact, the phrase “salt of the earth” is an allusion from the Bible. Jesus once said to his followers, “Ye are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its savor, wherewith shall it be salted”. Here, “salt of the earth” means the elite of the world. Therefore, the translated title 盐 which is deliberately deviated from the original, is the non-alternative choice in order to inform the theme of the film.

Alternative conscious treason often occurs in film title translation to fulfill its unique purpose, especially to well inform the audiences and urge them to pay for the film. For instance, the film *The American President* depicts a love story between the American president and a persuasive talker. There is no doubt that, the title can be translated into 盐 without any confusion aroused. However, the translation version 盐 which totally betrays the original in form, is proved to be more attractive and acceptable for the Chinese audiences.

The alternative treason is a unique and typical phenomenon which often occurs in the film title translation and it makes the film title translation different from the literature translation. It is a consensus that the translation should be faithful to the original text, and the treason may occur only because there are the barriers between different languages and cultures. In other words, the non-alternative treason is accepted, and the alternative treason may be criticized and regarded as the taboo in the translation of other kinds of text. However, film title is a unique material, it is the window of the film from which the audiences will know the basic information of the film, and it is the advertisement of the film, which bears the promotion of the film and has a say in the box office. To pursue the commercial value, whether the scholars in translation like it or not, alternative treason often appears now and then in the film title translation.

4. Manifestations of the treason in film title translation

4.1 Treason on literal horizon

Translated versions with the treason in this category deviate from the original to a certain degree, which do not totally deviate from the literal meaning of the original, but make some simple additions and deletions when selecting words in translation.

The translation of *Blood and Sand*《血》 serves as a very good example. If it is slavishly translated into 《血》, the version tends to be dry and unemotional. The translators do a remarkable job by adding two color words “血” and “血” based on the content of the film, and accordingly translates the name into 《血》. The two color words offer vividness and liveliness. The Chinese version proves not only terse and succinct, but also highly expressive and forceful. In addition, “血” originates from the book of Zhuangzi (《庄子》), a classic of traditional Chinese literature and it is used to symbolize the blood for justice. Such version is so thought-provoking and far-reaching that it is bound to induce fantastic reveries on the part of the audiences.
Besides, 《 flop 》 for Bambi, 《 flop 》 for Shrek, and 《 flop 》 for The Termina all belong to this kind.

### 4.2 Treason on informational horizon

In film title translation, some information is often added or deleted by the translators intentionally. The treason on this horizon makes the translated version much different from the original in form. Nevertheless, no matter how different the translated version is from the original name, it does not completely beyond the reach of the influence of the original name.

Here is an example. Ghost narrates a touching love story. In English culture, ghosts generally have something to do with religions. People think that ghosts are not horrible. They are just the embodiment of “good vs. evil” in man’s hearts or the humanization of man’s mental experiences. However, in Chinese culture, ghosts are always a taboo in human’s daily life. That is to say, ghost, which does not arouse antipathy in English culture, is resisted in China. The literal translation 《 》 is certainly unacceptable. People would regard it as a thriller at the first sight. Even worse, it misleads the audiences, since they may classify the film as horror genre before seeing it. Then the translators add the effective information of “love” ( ० ) in the translation and translate it into 《 》 to inform the audiences that the film is a tragic love story. It is proved that the 《 》 is warmly applauded by the audiences since it conveys the necessary and appealing information of the film, and at the same time, it is beautiful, elegant and eye-catching. On seeing this title, the audiences may feel strong aesthetic pleasure and great interest in watching this film. More examples can be named, such as 《 》 for The Bridges in Madison County, 《 》 for You’ve Got an E-mail, 《 》 for Hobson’s Choice.

### 4.3 Treason on comprehensive horizon

Some translated versions, such as 《 》 for Far and Away, 《 》 for The Rock, 《 》 for Sister Act, 《 》 for The Wizard of Oz, depart so far from the original titles and it seems that they have nothing to do with the original. In fact, there are two points deserving our consideration, one is to “burden some functions”, the other is to “keep in touch with source texts” (Reiss, K. & Vermeer, H., 1984, p. 52). According to Functionalism, the original works may have various translated versions which keep in touch with the source texts, to fulfill specific functions of the target text. It means that the translated titles are not confined in the original versions, but have extended to almost every intermediate sector of a film itself, including contents, themes, atmosphere, functions, and so on. In this sense, these translated titles are not unbridled, but still more or less connected with the original titles.

Thelma and Louise uses the names of the heroines as the film’s name. If employing literal translation, we would get the following Chinese film title 《 》, which is neither attractive nor special. In contrast, the translation 《 》 not only fully demonstrates the theme of the film, but also successfully pleases and attracts the audiences. In Chinese, “ ० ” means the end of the road; “ ० ” means wild and crazy; and “ ० ” is always used as a metaphor of women. So the Chinese title of this film vividly depicts the two wild and crazy women running to the end of the road, which is so proper for the film plot.

### 5. Causes of the treason in film title translation

The treason in film title translation may be the result of the translators’ careless and incompetence or their subjectivity, and it may also be caused by the barriers between different languages and cultures. Besides, there are some other factors, namely, the initiator, the target-text receiver, the functions of the film title which play a
On the treason in English film title translation

dominant role in causing the treason especially the alternative conscious treason, because of the unique characteristics of the film titles.

5.1 Initiator

In the traditional theories, translation generally involves three participants: the source language writer, the translator and the receiver of target language. The functional theory adds the initiator of the translation process, the user of the target text to the process, among which the initiator is of considerable importance.

“The initiator is the person, group or institution that starts off the translation process and determines its course by defining the purpose for which the target is needed” (Nord, 2001, p. 20). It is not the source text or its effect on the target text recipient, or the function assigned to it by the author, but the prospective function or skopos of the target text determined by the initiator’s needs that operates the translation process (Nord, 2001, p. 20). The initiator gives the translation brief, which directs the whole translation process. The translation brief includes the source text, the target usage, the translators, the recipient, the time, the place, the condition in which the target text will be used, communicative media and the intended functions of the target text. Compared with the initiator, even the source producer and the source text occupy an inferior position because the function of the target text is arrived at automatically from an analysis of the source text, but is pragmatically defined by the purpose of the initiator.

In this sense, the initiator needs a translator to work according to his translation requirement but not just to keep loyal to the source text. The initiator does not mind whether the target text is faithful to the source text or whether the qualities of the source text are preserved in translation. The intention of an initiator who spends a lot of money for translating films lies in achieving excellent box office, and the purpose of translating film titles is to promote the films among the target audiences. The most important thing for the initiator is to ensure that the translated text works in the target culture as the translation brief demands. So, from the angle of the initiator, the translator is entitled to employ flexible translating strategies or methods in order to fulfill the translation brief raised by initiator.

5.2 Target-text recipient

In the framework of functional theory, target-text recipient is one of the most important factors determining the purpose of a translation, since to translate means “to produce a target text needed for a target purpose and target addressees in target circumstances” (Vermeer, 1987, p. 29). The final and most important purpose of translating film titles is to impress the audiences and urge them to go to the cinema. Therefore, the audiences’ demand and taste are very important for the translation. Due to language and cultural differences, the audiences may not get the most effective information from some translated versions which are faithful to the original titles in form.

A translated film title can never be a success without the appreciation of the audiences. The translator is supposed to alter his translation strategies with a view to adjusting to the different needs of target recipient. The translators have to make a study of the taste, expectation, cultural background of the audiences and then make some conscious adjustment in their translating so as to appeal to the intended target-recipient. This makes a good explanation of the case of treason in translation, and also offers a reason why there are various translation versions of the same works.

5.3 Functions of the film title

Vermeer defines function as “what a text means or is intended to mean from the perspective of the target recipient”. Each text is produced for a certain function and should work for this function (Nord, 2001, p. 28). The
translation of a text should also be intended to fulfill the functions to serve the target receivers. Thus, the functions of any text to be translated are indispensable factors that the translator should take into consideration during his rendering of the text.

Text functions are closely related to text types. Different texts types serve different functions. Film titles have four basic functions, namely, informative, expressive, aesthetic and vocative. Most titles embrace all the functions, with an emphasis on one or two aspects of the four. Most informative titles will either have an expressive feature, or have a vocative thread running through. And an expressive title mostly carries information of the film, and is more or less vocative. Similarly vocative titles may contain information and be expressive or have aesthetic values to a certain extent. Generally the four functions operate all together within a film title and the informative, the expressive and the aesthetic ones serve the vocative one which is the typical function of film titles, and makes the film title translation be something different from other kinds of texts.

The multi-functions incorporated in films titles lead to a result that the film title is not purely a content-focused text, or a form-focused text or an appeal-focused text. It is a unity of the three with particular emphasis on one of them. The functionalists hold that different communicative functions, or from another angle, different text types, require different levels of faithfulness. There are some examples:

- Piano—🎵🎵🎵🎵 vs.🎵🎵🎵🎵
- Chocolate—🍫🍫🍫🍫 vs.🍫🍫🍫チョコ
- The Ring—🪦🪦🪦🪦 vs.🪦🪦🪦🪦
- Matrix—🤖🤖🤖🤖 vs.🤖🤖🤖🤖

In the above examples, the first translated versions deviate from the source text, while the second ones are faithfully translated versions. However, the former ones are proved more attractive and acceptable to the Chinese audiences than the latter ones, since they fulfill the specific functions of the film titles in the target circumstance by adding necessary information, by giving the audience aesthetic enjoyment, by creating some kind of suspense atmosphere, or by giving the audience more room for imagination. In brief, the translated versions with treason are inevitable due to the functions of film titles and the functions of film titles are the one of the main causes of the treason in film title translation.

6. Effects of treason in film title translation

The treason in film title translation is like a double edged sword. It is helpful to show the charms of the original title and enable the film to achieve its commercial value. On contrary, the treason may vulgarize the film title and the film, even result in low taste if using it without restraint. The effects of it can be various and are mainly reflected in the following two aspects:

6.1 Positive effects

Some deliberately made treason in film title translation is beneficial to foreign film’s wide spreading at different levels and helpful for the target audiences to accept the film. When two different cultures come into contact with each other, it is difficult for people to fully understand some terms in the source text. Therefore, translators have to make some appropriate adjustment and treason in the translation in order to provide a target text with the similar spirit and function to the original and to achieve the intended effect.

For example, dragon is regarded as a monster by the westerners, but in Chinese culture, dragon is the symbol of emperor and nobleness. The film Dragon Heart has got two versions: 《龙的心》 and 《龙的心》. The adding
On the treason in English film title translation

of “[]”, which is equivalent to “evil” in English in the second version introduces to the Chinese audiences with a different view point towards dragon, which is such a sacred symbol of power in Chinese culture. Therefore, the version 《☲ GENERIC 图》 is more acceptable to the audience and more fit to promote the film than the faithfully translated title 《ربية》.

Furthermore, the treason can rediscover the value of the original works by disclosing the unexplored latent meaning of the original works. With it, more and more translated film titles have been popularized and accepted beyond the limitation of region, time and space.

For example, the film 21 Grams depicts the story of three persons who were connected by an accident and entrapped contradiction between revenge and forgiveness. The title of the film is literally translated into 《 Krishna 》 and freely in 《WebKit 图》. Although the version 《WebKit 图》 betrays the original title, it is an excellent translation. It delivers the unexplored latent meaning of the original work so as to rediscover the value of the original title, since according to a legend, 21 grams is the weight one loses at the exact moment of his death (Williams, 2002, p. 3).

Last but not least, as has been elaborated in the previous part, the treason may help the translated versions to well perform the functions of the film title. Actually, some deliberately made treason makes the translated film title more informative, expressive, aesthetic or vocative. The creative and attractive film title can strengthen the function of calling upon people to see the film, thus realizing the economic value sought by the producers.

A case in point lies in the translation of Waterloo Bridge. This film tells a tragic love story. Waterloo Bridge plays a considerably important part in the film where the story begins and the heroine eventually commits suicide at the end of the film, thus the film is named after it. If it was faithfully translated into 《thouse 》 , the version would be prosaic and lifeless. To make the matter worse, the audience may well take it for a historical film about Napoleon. In the minds of the Chinese people, Waterloo Bridge is just the place where Napoleon encountered crushing defeat. The other translated version 《thouse 》 gives the content of the film, and the translator skillfully resorts to the Chinese folktale of Blue Bridge (.stack) which tallies with the story of the film. The two Chinese emotive characters “[]” give birth to the tragic flavor of the film and easily kindle the audiences’ curiosity about a heart-stirring love story hidden between the lines. In the translation 《thouse 》, the informative, expressive, aesthetic and vocative functions operate throughout this version. It is so impressive that it lingers on and on in the audiences hearts forever.

6.2 Negative effects

Although, to some extent, the treason will benefit film titles translation, its negative effects can not be ignored. The treason may make the translation a mistranslation or mistake, if it is the result of the translators’ misunderstanding of the original. Such versions can not correctly transfer the information and the implication of the original title, and will mislead the audiences.

Sometimes, to seek the commercial value, the deliberately made treason makes the translation goes too far from the original title and they even have nothing to do with the film. For example, 《fire 》 for The Secretary, 《fire 》 for Kindergarten Cop, 《fire 》 for Gladiator, 《fire 》 for Taxi, 《fire 》 for Call of the Gild, and so on. Treason occurs in these versions by deliberately using “shocking” words that emphasize the connotation of violence, sex and desire, such as 《fire 》, 《fire 》, 《fire 》, 《fire 》, to catch the audiences’ eyeballs without taking into consideration the information function, expressive function and aesthetic function.

In addition, the treason may give some film titles the features of vulgarity, low taste and obscenity. Examples
are for Made in America, for As Good as It Gets, for Bibi Confession of Sweet, and so on.

7. Conclusion

Due to the specific features of film title, the treason is an inevitable phenomenon in film title translation, though faithfulness is always valued as the highest criterion in translation. Treating treason in the proper way will do some help to make the translation neither stiff translation that exactly follows the form of the original nor blind translation or translation without any restraint.

The study of the treason in film title translation enables the translators and researchers to understand and treat the inevitable phenomenon, treason, properly, and to change the traditional attitude of regarding treason as a taboo in the translation. In addition, the study of treason has a directive function to translation practice. It entitles translators to do translation with multi-dimensional criteria and enables translators to choose different strategies according to different translation purposes and thus may help translators to bring their subjectivity into full play so as to produce excellent translation. Moreover, the study of treason in film title translation also promotes translation criticism. Traditional translation criticism has long held “faithfulness” as the only criterion for assessing translation quality. A great number of translators have been lauded for their marvelous feat of making a “faithful” reproduction of the original text. However, while faithful translations are valued, we can never turn a blind eye to the significance of those not-so-faithful translations that have great influence in practice. Certainly, it has nothing to do with the quack translations by irresponsible or incompetent translators, and they do not deserve readers’ due recognition as well as serious study. At this point, the study makes reader rethink the criteria for translation criticism.

References:

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