Abstract

This study is an analysis of translation techniques used when translating subtitles from English into Thai of comedy films. The theory of translation techniques applied in this study is based on Newmark (1988). The purposes of the study are: 1) to investigate the techniques used in translating subtitles from English into Thai; and 2) to examine the possible linguistic and cultural features that influence the use of these techniques. The samples of comedy films are categorized into three genres which are typical comedy, romantic comedy and action comedy films.

The results show that the categories of translation techniques frequently found in translating subtitles of comedy films are the literal translation technique, the transference technique, the cultural equivalent technique and the word-omission technique. The most common technique used in translating subtitles of comedy films is the literal translation technique. The reason is that the translator wishes to retain the entire message from the original language to the TL audience as accurately as possible, and the language utilized in comedy films is usually short, simple and used in everyday life.

Key words: Translation technique, Linguistic features, Subtitles and Comedy Films

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Introduction

In today’s globalized world people have more opportunity to communicate with one another across linguistic and cultural borders. Translation, therefore, is an essential tool for breaking down cross-cultural communication barriers. Hence, translation is an essential feature of today’s world, not only in printed matters, e.g. novels, magazines, and textbooks, but also in television and film scripts. Translations facilitate the transfer of knowledge as well as entertainment to the public. Moreover, due to the great prevalence of foreign films in Thailand, translation in the movie business has gained an increasingly important role. In order to serve the needs of audiences who represent different levels of foreign language proficiency, film scripts of various genres and languages are translated into Thai.

At present, there are several studies which examine screen translation. Most of them aim to study dubbing techniques of screen translation. However, there are a few studies that observe translation techniques used in subtitles and also linguistic features that influence the use of such techniques in screen translation.

This situation has drawn my attention to investigate whether there are any particular techniques employed in subtitle translation. The present study will examine the translation techniques and also the linguistic features that influence the use of such techniques in translating subtitles of comedy films. The reason why comedy films were chosen as a case study is they typically involve not only linguistic differences and the use of figures of speech, but they are also concerned with some aspects of cultural differences. These factors and characteristics render it more difficult to convey the exact meaning of the translated text. The results of the study provide the guidelines for translating subtitles of comedy films as well as films of other genres.

Research Methodology

Since the researcher aims at studying the translation techniques and their linguistic features used in translating subtitles of comedy films, the researcher needs to collect the data from comedy DVDs with Thai subtitles. The research methods are in two steps, as follows.

1) Data collection; the researcher has chosen to concentrate on contemporary comedy movies from the year 2000 until the present time. Three contemporary movies have been selected, namely: Beauty Shop, The Pacifier and The Princess Diaries: Royal Engagement. These three movies represent different genres of comedy: 1) typical comedy, 2) action comedy and 3) romantic comedy.

2) Data analysis and coding scheme; the data analysis is divided into two parts: the techniques used in translating subtitles of comedy films and linguistic features influencing the use of such techniques. The first part discusses the translation techniques used in translating subtitles in comedy films. The theory of translation techniques is based on the translation framework of Newmark (1988) that classified such techniques
into eleven procedures, which are 1) literal translation, 2) transference, 3) cultural equivalent, 4) functional equivalent, 5) descriptive equivalent, 6) synonymy, 7) through-translation, 8) reduction and expansion, 9) paraphrase, 10) couplets and 11) notes, additions, glosses. The second part of data analysis discusses the possible features that influence the use of these techniques, assuming that there are linguistic features which influence the use of such techniques. The features may be associated with the syntactic structure, other linguistic features, cultural aspects, register, tone, style and flavor.

Results

The study presents an analysis of translation techniques applied in subtitles of comedy films and the linguistic features characterizing these techniques. This chapter comprises four translation techniques, based on the framework of Newmark (1988), found in translating subtitles of three different genres of comedy films. They are the literal translation technique, the transference technique, the cultural equivalent technique and the word-omission technique, respectively, differentiated as follows.

1). The Literal Translation Technique

The literal translation technique is the basic translation procedure of all translation procedures. According to Newmark (1988: 69), literal translation goes beyond word-for-word translation; it retains the full meaning of the SL text compared to the TL text, not only in terms of lexical meaning but also the grammatical meaning. Newmark believes the literal translation to be the basic translation procedure, both in communicative and semantic translation, in that translation starts from this procedure. This technique is the first and the most common used technique in translating subtitles from English into Thai. The linguistic features associated with this technique are

1.1) Conditional Sentences – the first two types of conditional sentences; real and past unreal conditionals
1.2) Short Phrases – a group of a few words, no subject and verb in it
1.3) Proper Nouns – a noun with recognized translation in TL language
1.4) Imperative Sentence – instructive, request and command sentence

In brief, the literal translation is used when the words of SL text are simple and used in everyday life. Moreover, the sentence structures of the SL language are uncomplicated and short. From the reasons above, it is quite obvious that the most suitable technique for translating this kind of sentences is the literal translation technique. According to Newmark (1988: 73), in translation, the translator does translate words, because there is nothing else to translate. Sentences consist of

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1. SL is an initial of Source Language. SL, in this study, refers to English language.
2. TL is an initial of Target Language. TL, in this study, refers to Thai language.
words. Consequently, if the translator is able to translate all words in the SL text literally, it can be said that he applies the literal translation technique in his procedure of translating.

2). The Transference Technique

Newmark (1988: 81) states that transference is the process of transferring a SL word to a TL text as a translation procedure. The word then becomes a ‘loan word’.

After analyzing the data, it can be noticed that the transference technique is applied with different types of proper nouns which are: 1) Names of all Living – names of every single person in this world, including names of all pets and types of animals, 2) Geographical and Topographical Names – names of all countries presently existing, including newly independent countries, 3) Titles of Untranslated Literary Works, Plays, Films – names of books, novels and children literature, including names of all stage plays and movies, 4) Names of Private Companies and Institutions – possibly be names of famous restaurants, brand-name products and well-known department stores and 5) Names of Public or Nationalized Institutions – names of well-known public or nationalized institutions to people around the world, no matter what culture or language they represent.

In conclusion, transference technique is used when transferring names of living beings, geographical and topographical names, titles of untranslated literary works, plays and films, names of private companies and institutions and names of public or nationalized institutions. These categories of names are unnecessary to translate from the SL language to the TL text because the audience will recognize these names better in the original version than in a translated one. Moreover, they are proper nouns used for calling human beings, animals, specific places and brand of products - we do not need to translate them. If the translator translates these names, the audience may not understand what the names really mean. Consequently, the best way to convey the exact meaning of these names is to use the original names in the Thai version.

3). The Cultural Equivalent Technique

Newmark (1988: 82-3) defines the cultural equivalent technique as an approximate translation where a SL cultural word is translated by a TL cultural word. The use of this technique is limited to certain cases and contexts; this technique has a greater practical impact than culturally neutral terms. The data can be categorized into 4 major groups applying the use of the cultural equivalent technique. The four groups are:

3.1) Expressions Associated with Culture – expressions linked to a specific culture; these include, for example, greetings, leave-takings, terms referring to loved ones and comparison

3.2) Expressions Translated by Fad Words or Slang – expressions translated in the TL language by the use of fad words or slang
3.3) Exclamatory Expressions – expressions expressing sudden and strong feelings such as surprise, wonder, pity, sympathy, happiness, or gratitude and usually followed by an exclamation mark

3.4) Idioms – idiomatic expressions requiring some background knowledge, information, or experience, to use only within a culture where parties have a common reference to translate them

In summary, this technique is applied when the translator needs to adapt the text, adjusting it to a version that fits the TL culture. In such circumstances, the cultural equivalent technique ensures that the correct meanings and messages are sent to the audience and - simultaneously - that the corresponding flavor, mood, and style of the speakers are adequately and correctly conveyed. Additionally, this technique will also contribute to making the TL language appear smooth and natural.

4). The Word-Omission Technique

Oxford Dictionary (2005: 1057) defines omission as the act of not including somebody/something or not doing something, or the fact of not being included/done. Moreover, Macmillan English Dictionary (2002: 987) adds a definition of omission as someone or something that has not been included, either deliberately or because someone forgot. Applying these definitions to translation, word-omission is a translation technique whereby words are omitted from TL language. This technique is conveniently used when the TL language becomes clearer and more natural with certain words omitted.

In contrast to the other techniques covered by this study, the word-omission technique is a feature which is not included in the framework of Newmark (1988). The researcher would like to add the word-omission technique as a particularly relevant method for translations from English into Thai.

The word-omission technique is used in four cases:

1) Omission of Subject e.g. (English): I’ll take you guys in until we hit radar range.

(Thai): แม้ว่าคุณไม่ต้องมึนเร็วค่ะ

2) Omission of Subject and Verb of Thinking/Reporting in a Main Clause e.g.

(English): Well, for the younger ones, I think it hasn’t really sunk in yet.

(Thai): พวกน้อยๆยังไม่เชื่อว่าเกิดอะไรมาบ้างค่ะ

(English): I mean, I hear they make man go crazy.

(Thai): มันทำให้ผู้ชายแทบจะไม่สามารถคิดอะไรได้

3) Omission of Object e.g. (English): She also told me, you’re a “Teams” guy.

(Thai): เธอบอกด้วยว่าคุณเป็นกัตตุตะแกร่ง
4) Omission of Modifier

- Nouns modifiers e.g. (English): Thanks to Princess Mia's *special* surprise.
  (Thai):  ขอบคุณสำหรับความน่าทึ่งจากเจ้าหญิงมิยา

- Verbs modifiers e.g. (English): I'll take care of it *later*.
  (Thai):  จะจัดการให้เรียบร้อย

In short, the word-omission technique is applied when the context and meaning is clear and unequivocal, hence there is no doubt who is the subject, the subject and verb of thinking/reporting in a main clause, the object and the modifier of the sentences. In such cases, there is no need – when translating into Thai – to translate each and every word literally. Moreover, Thai is a pro-drop language in which the subject and the object of a sentence is naturally omitted when the meaning of the texts are clear about who’s talking or being talked to. It can be seen from the examples provided that these four cases of word-omission can and should be applied as long as they do not distort the main ideas of the translation and do not mislead the audience into misinterpretation of the texts.

Discussion

This study has uncovered a number of important issues and aspects of translation of subtitles from English to Thai.

Based on the findings, it can be argued that in order to translate film subtitles professionally, the translator needs not only proficiency in both languages but also a great deal of cultural awareness about both the SL and TL cultures. In addition, included in the cultural awareness, the translator must also be updated about contemporary youth and urban culture.

Furthermore, one of the basic principles of requirements for producing film subtitles is concerned about the amounts of characters (letters) of subtitling in each sentence. In order to provide for sufficient time for the audience's reading, the amount of characters in each sentence cannot be more than 28-32. Otherwise, the audience may loose the attention span, and understanding will be negatively affected. This factor thus constitutes an added incentive for the translator to apply the omission technique.

From two points above, it leads to the conclusion of the study that the translation techniques applied in translating Thai subtitles of comedy films depend on various linguistic features of the SL text. A perfect translation which fits in the TL culture and retains flavor, mood, style, naturalness and

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4 A pro-drop language (from "pronoun-dropping") is a language in which certain classes of pronouns may be omitted when they are in some sense pragmatically inferable. In everyday speech there are often instances when who or what is being referred to can be inferred from context. Proponents of the term "pro-drop" take the view that pronouns which in other languages would have those referents can be omitted. Among major languages, what might be called a pro-drop language are e.g. Japanese (featuring pronoun deletion not only for subjects, but for practically all grammatical contexts) Chinese and Slavic languages (Wikipedia, The free encyclopedia: Jan. 15, 09)
smoothness of the TL culture and also does not distort the meaning of the original version, requires awareness not only of the linguistic factors of the two languages but also of the cultural factors pertaining to the two cultures, and finally also observance of the subtitling rules.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study has found four translation techniques applied in translating subtitles from English to Thai of comedy films base on the translation theory of Newmark (1988). Moreover, there are a number of linguistic features associated with the use of such techniques. The translation techniques and their linguistic features are summarized as follows.

The first technique which is the literal translation technique is applied when the words of SL text are simple and used in everyday life and when the sentence structures of the SL language are uncomplicated and short. In such instances, the most appropriate technique for translating every single word in whole text is the literal translation, because if the translator is able to translate all words in the SL to TL text, it means he applies the use of the literal translation technique. Then the second technique is the transference technique. It is used when proper nouns of different types of names occur in the SL text. The reason for applying this technique is that such proper nouns are names of well-known people, places, countries, companies and institutions etc. The TL audience will be familiar with their original names better than the translated version. The cultural equivalent technique is the third technique in this study. It is used when the translator needs to add flavor, mood and style of the TL culture into the translated version in order to make the TL language appear smooth and natural. This technique helps adjust the text to fit TL culture and embrace the feeling of the TL audience. The last technique is the word-omission technique which is utilized when the context and meaning is clear and unequivocal. When the information provided in the text is adequate and the surrounding contents lead the audience to a perfect understanding of the whole meaning, some particular words can be omitted in the translation in order to achieve an adequate and correct translation in tune with the TL language.

A translator of film subtitles has an important and responsible task. The success of the film – and the entire understanding and emotional experience of the movie theatre audience – is highly dependent upon the quality of the translation and subtitling. As we have seen, it can be inferred from this study that the translation task requires not only advanced linguistic skills in the SL and the TL language, but also a high degree of cultural awareness. It must also be understood that cultural awareness and knowledge is a “fluid” skill that cannot be learned in one go and then applied for years to come; rather, it has to be updated and added to regularly throughout the working career of the translator. In particular, the translator needs to keep himself/herself updated about the current slang and idioms of the youth, since young people are often featured in films and since a very large
part of the audience consists of the younger generation. In this context, the translator must also keep in mind, that slang and idioms are mostly very short lived and belong to a certain period in time and – sometimes – only to a certain class or group of people in society. In other words, there is a linguistic as well as a cultural dimension involved in the translation task. In addition, we have concluded that there is also a technical dimension, namely the need to keep the subtitles within a certain range in order to allow the audience sufficient time to read and understand the subtitles.

References


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