Politeness and Audience Response in Chinese–English Subtitling

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Introduction

Despite a significant amount of work that has been published on quality assessment and strategy development (Kovačič 1996b, Díaz-Cintas and Remael 2007) in audiovisual translation (AVT) studies, much less seems to be available on face management issues in AVT research and viewer response in AVT. This research focuses on investigating the representation of face negotiation in Chinese–English subtitling and examining its impact on audience response. This study follows Hatim and Mason's (1997: 96) call for empirical investigation of the effect that omission in subtitles may have on 'source language and target language auditor impressions of characters' attitude', which has long been a neglected area in AVT studies.

In the area of face negotiation, Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) made the first attempt to set up a comprehensive politeness model that has attracted much discussion and criticism. Among the critics, Watts (2003) voices a valid argument that the model is not a model of politeness but is actually oriented to face management, and hence ushers in a call for separating the notion of face from politeness. Spencer-Oatey (2000) suggests that it is necessary to move from the notion of politeness to socio-pragmatic interactional principles (SIP), which help to manage people's face/rapport concerns, and also recognises the important impact of cultural variables. In formulating a theoretical framework for this research, this study draws from Brown and Levinson's (1987) face framework and Spencer-Oatey's (2000) rapport management notion,[1] and establishes a Composite Model of Face Management tailored specifically for the analysis of this research's

1   Although Spencer-Oatey (2000) proposes the notion of 'rapport management', the general research in this arena is still accepted as 'politeness' and it appears that Spencer-Oatey also retains this term 'politeness' in her writing, even though it is argued to be inappropriate.

data that encompasses English and Chinese face management behaviour. It is necessary to develop the Composite Model because Brown and Levinson's (1987) facework is arguably not applicable to conflictual discourse data (Culpeper et al. 2003), nor does it acknowledge cultural differences affecting people's weighting of face wants. In addition, although Spencer-Oatey's (2000) rapport management theory with cultural underpinnings provides the best remedy to the above two shortcomings, research into specific rapport management strategies is believed to be not yet adequate. Therefore, it is important to establish a Composite Model that combines the strengths of the two theories and incorporates salient cultural differences between the West and the Far East.

In the area of research on subtitling, previous studies have shown that, due to temporal and spatial constraints, subtitling involves abbreviating and shortening the film dialogue (Ivarsson and Carroll 1998, De Linde and Kay 1999, Díaz-Cintas and Remael 2007). Therefore, what happens to the representation of face management in the subtitles because of these constraints? How do audiences actually respond to face management conveyed in subtitles? These issues constitute two important research gaps in AVT studies.

This study, for the first time, uses Chinese language films with English subtitles and English language films subtitled into Chinese as the data for investigating the representation of face management in subtitling. Chinese and English are markedly remote from each other in both linguistic and cultural terms. Therefore, people from mainland China and Britain may initiate very different face behaviour, linguistically and in body language, when they manage rapport with each other.[2] In the context of subtitling, this

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2   In seeking a desirable unit by which the concept of 'culture' can be applied as a viable tool, this study adopts Dahl's (2004: 7) suggestion that 'in more practical terms, national boundaries have been the preferred level of resolution, and therefore countries the preferred unit of analysis'. Such approach is applied in the data analysis of the film sequences and the subject responses in this study. In the meanwhile, it is noteworthy that in face and politeness research, scholars do establish a dichotomy between East and West, and apply 'English' to a variety of English-speaking communities (Spencer-Oatey 2008), which is retained in this study when discussing general research in politeness theories.

may suggest that more work is needed when translating between Chinese and English in order to facilitate viewers' comprehension than, for example, when subtitling between French and English. In the same vein, challenges such as the translation of face markers and face strategies could also prove to be greater. As a result, using data which display such distinct features could offer enhanced insights into some of the face management issues at play in film dialogue and the corresponding target language (TL) subtitles.

In view of the above observations, this research endeavours to investigate the representation of face management in subtitling as well as audience response between Chinese and English. Specifically, this study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. *To investigate the presence in the subtitles of indicators of face management in the source film.* In accordance with this objective, the study seeks to examine whether those indicators of face management which are employed in the film have been represented in subtitles, and whether there are differences between face management features in the film and in the subtitles. To achieve this objective, this study will undertake analysis of face management features depicted in selected Chinese and English film sequences, and then compare them to those represented in the English and Chinese subtitles, in an attempt to find out how subtitling captures film characters' construction of their interpersonal relationships.

2. *To investigate the reception and response to the face management features identified under objective 1.* Fulfilling this aim will involve developing audience response tests to elicit Chinese and British subjects' actual interpretations of interlocutors' face management characteristics when they have to rely on subtitles, and comparing the interpretations to source language (SL) viewers' perceptions who rely on soundtrack and visual images. The tests are aimed to find out whether audiences who rely on subtitles are denied access to certain features of face management that are available to SL film viewers, and whether audiences pick up all or part of what they need to know about face via paralinguistic semiotic codes, i.e. body language and prosodic features. Fulfilling this objective will distinguish the research as the first and only so far to use audience response methods to explore the actual perception of facework represented in subtitling.

3. *To consider the significance of the findings for audiovisual translation theory.* The findings of this research could have considerable implications for AVT studies. Firstly, it may demonstrate whether audience response tests could successfully elicit viewers' interpretations of a certain aspect of subtitling, in this case the face management perspective, when the tests comprise open-ended questions without informing subjects of the research scope or guiding them in any way. Secondly, the findings from the response data may yield illuminating insights into subtitling strategy development from face perspectives and they may also inform whether paralinguistic face markers should be incorporated into written subtitles.

The book includes six chapters. Chapter 2 presents a theoretical review of two research areas that are pertinent to the scope of this study, that is, face management and subtitling. In the review of research on face management, this study analyses Brown and Levinson's (1987) facework and defends the applicability of the notion of negative face to Chinese culture through a historical review of cultural developments in China. This constitutes a major contribution to the formulation of the theoretical framework developed for this study's data analysis. Moreover, Spencer-Oatey's (2000) rapport management theory with cultural underpinnings is also examined in detail since it provides another important basis for conceptualising the theoretical framework. Finally, the review of studies on subtitling, which is set against the background of face management theory, examines the nature of subtitling, its technical constraints, and the inevitable reformulations and omissions in subtitling which in turn impact on the representation of face negotiation in subtitling.

Drawing from the above theoretical review, Chapter 3 proposes a Composite Model of Face Management within which the present analysis can be conducted. The model combines the strengths of facework and rapport management theory, and incorporates salient cultural differences between volition and discernment, in order to unpack people's face management behaviour across cultures. Chapter 3 also discusses the research corpus that comprises three Chinese language film sequences subtitled into English and three English language film sequences with subtitles in Chinese. Corpus transcription and coding, and the procedures for the

audience response tests, are subsequently explained to inform readers of the main methodological aspects of this research.

Attention in Chapter 4 then turns to the analysis of face management features in each of the selected film sequences, followed by the analysis of face features represented in the corresponding subtitles.

In Chapter 5, the main analytical findings from audience response data are presented. Omissions of face markers and changes of face strategies in subtitles reveal a noticeable impact on viewers who rely on subtitles in their interpretations of interlocutors' personality, attitude and interactional intentions. It is also shown that viewers do rely on body language when they interpret face interactions, and foreign viewers can misinterpret salient paralinguistic cues displayed on screen. The audience responses provide an important correction to the subjectivity of the analysis undertaken in Chapter 4.

Finally, Chapter 6 reviews the main findings of the analysis and discusses the implications for future research, in particular, in the areas of developing strategies in subtitling that will incorporate face concerns and the codification of nonverbal information from a face management perspective.