A Study of Translation Strategies in the Translation of Songs in Walt Disney’s Animated Feature Films into Thai Versions*

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to analyze the translation strategies at word level employed in the translation of songs in Walt Disney’s animated feature films from English into Thai. The frequency of each translation strategy was also measured. Translation strategies for dealing with non-equivalence at word level proposed by Baker (1992) were applied as a framework for the data analysis. The data for the study were the original song lyrics and the Thai translation versions of 27 songs from four Walt Disney’s animated feature films which were released between 2003 and 2013. The result of the study indicated that there were seven such translation strategies, based on Baker’s (1992) framework, identified as used in the study. The translation strategies, ranked from the most to the least frequently used, were translation by omission, translation by paraphrase using unrelated words, translation by using a loan word, translation by paraphrase using a related word, translation by a more general word (superordinate), translation by a more neutral/less expressive word, and translation by cultural substitution. The frequency of each translation strategy found was established by considering the following: the poetic form of song lyrics, the differences of language constructions between Thai and English, and socio-culture of the source text and the target text.

Keywords: Translation of song lyrics, Translation strategy for dealing with non-equivalence at word level based on Baker’s (1992) framework, Songs in Walt Disney’s animated feature films

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Introduction

Translation, according to Nida and Taber (1982), is a process of “reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalence of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style”. Translation theorists assert that translation of literary text is a difficult task, particularly the translation of text written in the form of poetry (Nida, 1964; Bassnett, 2002; Raffel, 1988; Newmark, 1991). Song is a type of text written in the same pattern as poetry, which Nida (1964) states is “poetry set to music”. Translation of song lyrics is complicated because it requires the translator to make choices of words that match with the number of notes, the rhythm, the music, and to be aware of the length of the song phrases (George, 2004).

Song lyrics are written in a similar way to that of poetry and the principles relating to poetry and its translation can be regarded as a useful reference for the translation of songs. Poetry is written chiefly to express a poet’s state of mind or reaction toward a situation that the poet has encountered rather than giving information or narrating a situation (สัญชี, 2550). For the translation of poetry, some scholars have proposed strategies coming from several different perspectives. For instance, Lefevere’s (1975) seven strategies are regarded as theories that are specifically proposed for poetry translation (Baker & Saldanha, 2011). The seven strategies proposed by Lefevere (1975, as cited in Bassnett, 2002) include: phonemic translation, literal translation, metrical translation, poetry into prose, rhymed translation, blank verse translation, and interpretation. For Raffel (1988), translation of poetry is classified into four broad types based on different target audiences which are formal translation, interpretive translation, expansive translation, and imitative translation. Understanding the nature and theories relating to poetry can presumably pave the way for the translation of song lyrics.

A good example of translation of song lyrics can typically be found in songs used in animated feature films. The Walt Disney Company is a leading production company, having produced many remarkable animated feature films, over decades, with songs specially composed for the films. In these films, songs are the central ideas and the popularity of the films has resulted in the popularity and success of the songs themselves (Hischak & Robinson, 2009). These songs play significant roles in storytelling as they help audiences to understand the characters’ emotions and feelings (Edmondson, 2013). Dubbed versions of Walt Disney’s songs have also been popular among audiences worldwide.

The attractiveness and success of the dubbed versions of songs, as in the Walt Disney’s songs, is due to the effective process of translation. The translated versions of songs that can capture the audiences’ attention must be as beautiful and evocative as the originals. To make the translated version sound as if it was written originally in the target language is the key point...
of the translation. This can only be done through the use of natural grammatical constructions and appropriate words in the target language (Larson, 1998).

The researcher puts an emphasis on exploring the song lyrics at the word level which should give more understanding of how a translator uses words in the translated versions. According to รัชนีโรชน์ (2552), a word is a small but complicated unit in a language which can be a primary step in understanding the nature of a particular language and it is necessary to understand the meaning of a word or a set of words in translation. In order to achieve the natural language in the target text, it is necessary to follow certain steps; considering the potential meaning of the words, finding the meanings of the words in context, finding potential equivalents in the target language and choosing the optimal equivalents (รัชนีโรชน์, 2552).

For translation of song lyrics, therefore, translation equivalence becomes a crucial approach to accomplishing the task. There are some strategies that are feasible for achieving equivalence in translation at word level. Among these strategies, one framework that proves valuable was proposed by Baker (1992). According to Baker (1992), eight translation strategies will be useful in dealing with non-equivalence at word level, namely, translation by a more general word (superordinate), translation by a more neutral/less expressive word, translation by cultural substitution, translation by using a loan word or loan word plus explanation, translation by paraphrase using a related word, translation by paraphrase using unrelated words, translation by omission, and translation by illustration.

The framework based on Baker (1992) appears to be the most appropriate framework to apply for dealing with non-equivalence in a text that has limited space as in a song phrase. For example, the application of translation by omission can be useful to avoid making an extensive translation in the song phrase. When it comes to culture-specific items or newly introduced concepts in song lyrics, translation by using a loan word or loan word plus explanation can be applied. The applications of translation by paraphrase using a related word, or paraphrase using unrelated words provide plausible ways to choose appropriate words. In sum, Baker’s (1992) translation equivalence at the word level can be applicable to find possible equivalents in order to make choices of words that match with the number of notes, the rhythm, the music, and the length of the song phrase.

The purpose of the current study, therefore, was to analyze the application of translation strategies for dealing with non-equivalence at word level, based on Baker’s (1992) framework, in the translation of the songs in Walt Disney’s animated feature films into Thai. The study is expected to provide valuable information in regard to the study of the translation of song lyrics.
Research Objectives

This study is conducted to analyze the translation strategies for dealing with non-equivalence at word level based on Baker’s (1992) framework in the translation of songs in Walt Disney’s animated feature films from English into Thai versions. Therefore, the main purposes of the study are to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the translation strategies employed in the translation of songs in Walt Disney’s animated feature films from English into Thai?
2. What is the frequency of each translation strategy in the translation of songs in Walt Disney’s animated feature films from English into Thai?

Theoretical Framework

A framework that deals with translation equivalence at word level in the study is the one proposed by Mona Baker (1992). It is claimed by Baker (1992) that professional translators handle with several types of non-equivalence by applying the following strategies. Eight translation strategies, according to Baker (1992), include translation by a more general word (superordinate), translation by a more neutral/less expressive word, translation by cultural substitution, translation by using a loan word or loan word plus explanation, translation by paraphrase using a related word, translation by paraphrase using unrelated words, translation by omission, and translation by illustration.

Research Methodology

Data Collection

The data for this study were obtained from the original English song lyrics and from the Thai translated versions of 27 songs from four Walt Disney animated feature films released between 2003 and 2013. The films and songs were selected by means of purposive sampling. These songs were selected based on the endorsement of the films among viewers and had received largely positive reviews from critics and viewers, and they were successful at the box office and had garnered a variety of awards and nominations. The Thai versions of the selected songs were translated by Tanee Poonsuwan who is a famous vocalist, performer, and translator in Thailand. The list of the translated songs used in each film was taken from the end credits appearing in the DVDs of each selected film. The titles of the films are 1. Brother Bear (2003), 2. The Princess and the Frog (2009), 3. Tangled (2010), and 4. Frozen (2013).

Data Analysis

The original English lyrics of the songs were taken from http://www.disneyclips.com/lyrics/ and the Thai translated versions of the song lyrics translated by “TaneePoonsuwan” were taken from Walt Disney Thai Songs, the official YouTube channel of the Walt Disney Studios.
Motion Pictures, Thailand. The original English versions and the Thai translated versions of the song lyrics were inspected to find their equivalent meanings in each song phrase. The translation strategies used by the translator in the Thai versions of the song lyrics of Walt Disney animated feature films were analyzed using the framework based on Baker’s (1992) translation strategies which include:

1. Translation by a more general word (super ordinate)
2. Translation by a more neutral/less expressive word
3. Translation by cultural substitution
4. Translation by using a loan word or loan word plus explanation
5. Translation by paraphrase using a related word
6. Translation by paraphrase using unrelated words
7. Translation by omission
8. Translation by illustration

Plausible explanations for the translator’s use of specific strategies were also proposed. The frequency of each type of translation strategy is then calculated into a percentage by using the following formula:

\[
\frac{N \times 100}{T}
\]

\(N = \text{The frequency of a strategy used}\)
\(T = \text{The total number of strategies used}\)

**Research Conclusion**

The original song lyrics and the Thai translated versions of the twenty seven songs were analyzed to find the translation strategies used and to find the frequency of each translation strategy in the translation of song lyrics. The result was shown as on the table below.

**Table:** Frequency and percentage of each translation strategy at word level found in the song lyrics in Walt Disney’s animated feature films

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Type of Translation Strategy</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Translation by omission</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>76.79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Translation by paraphrase using unrelated words</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Translation by using a loan word or loan word plus explanation</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5.36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Translation by paraphrase using a related word</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4.64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Translation by a more general word (super ordinate)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The results of the study showed that there are seven strategies based on Baker’s (1992) framework employed in the translation of songs in Walt Disney’s animated feature films from English into Thai versions. The most frequent translation strategy found was translation by omission (76.79%), followed by translation by paraphrase using unrelated words (7.14%), translation by using a loan word (5.36%), translation by paraphrase using a related word (4.64%), translation by a more general word (super ordinate) (2.50%), translation by a more neutral/less expressive word and translation by cultural substitution were at the same frequency (1.79%). However, translation by illustration was not found in this study.

6. Translation by a more neutral/less expressive word       5       1.79%
7. Translation by cultural substitution                   5       1.79%
8. Translation by illustration                           -       -

| Total | 280 | 100% |

Based on the findings, translation by omission was the most frequent translation strategy found in the study. There were the omissions of subject pronouns, object pronouns, coordinating conjunctions, filler words, adverbs and adjectives, noun or noun phrase, prepositional phrases, and repeated words or phrases.

The subject and object pronouns of a sentence were omitted most in each song phrase. It is understandable that the omission of subject and object pronoun is common in the context of the target language. As Attaviriyanupap (n.d.) states, Thai native speakers omit the subject of a sentence, particularly in informal contexts since Thai is a pro-drop language, so the subject can be omitted without causing loss of meaning of the target text (Kobsiriphat, 1988 as cited in Meechanyakul and Singhapreecha, n.d.). Filler words appearing in the song lyrics were also frequently omitted. This is because these filler words contain no special meaning to the target text; therefore, they were not translated to the target text. For coordinate conjunctions, these words were frequently omitted as they may not be vital enough to the development of the target text. The application of translation by omission with content words such as adverbs, adjectives, noun, noun phrase, or prepositional phrases could be that these words contain no special meaning to the development of the target text.

The application of translation by paraphrase using unrelated words was found many times in the study. Songs is aimed at entertaining the audiences, the lyrics are intended to please the ears of the listeners, and therefore, the strategy of paraphrase could not be avoidable to create appropriate words. It is the intention of the translator to use different words from the original lyrics but they could still transfer the same message that the original text intended to convey.
When it comes to culture-specific items, translation by using a loan word was applied various times in the translation. Different loan words found in the song lyrics in the study were English loan words. Loan words are widely used by Thai native speakers. In spite of an acceptable Thai equivalent for the word, the English loan word was preferred especially among teenagers as they consider using English loan words would sound more fashionable (Thaitranslation, 2008).

The translation by paraphrase using a related word was also employed several times in the study. The change of form or function of a word is intended to make the translated version sound like the language used in real life. Naturalness of the language in the translated text is the central concept of translation. As Larson (1998) states, the use of natural grammatical constructions and appropriate words in the target language are crucial in translating every piece of text.

For translation by a more general word (superordinate), the strategy was not often found in the study because there were not many specific terms that needed the application of translation by a more general word. According to Baker (1992), the use of a general word helps coping with the lack of a specific word in the target language. However, the results of the study found that it was about word choice rather than the lack of a specific word in the target language.

Translation by a more neutral/less expressive word and translation by cultural substitution were found at the same frequency in the study. Translation by a more neutral/less expressive word is applied in order to avoid communicating the wrong expressive meaning. For example, the phrase “breaking femurs” in a song “I’ve Got A Dream” from the film entitled “Tangled” was translated to the target text “มีเรื่อง” [meereuang] which means “to get into trouble or to quarrel with somebody”. Translation by a more neutral/less expressive word in this example tends to suggest a general concept of quarrelling rather than giving a vivid picture of the quarrel “to break femurs”.

For cultural substitution, the strategy was used according to differences of socio-cultural contexts between the source text and target text. This cultural substitution would be helpful for the target audiences to understand the sense and the message of the original text. The application of cultural substitution was not often found in the study. Mr. Todsaporn Rungwittaya, a technical and production director of Character Voices International Asia-Pacific under the Walt Disney Company (Thailand) Ltd, said although it is acceptable to adapt Thai culture to the translated version, the translation should be as close as the original (We love movie club, 2014).

The translation strategy by illustration was not found in the study. This strategy can be used to refer to a physical entity which can be illustrated. Illustration, therefore, cannot be applied in this study.

Although it is impossible to find the exact equivalents of words or phrases between the two different languages in translating song lyrics in this study, the applications of translation
strategies for non-equivalence at word level based on Baker’s (1992) framework were valuable in the translation.

In summary, the result of the study indicated that translation of song lyrics requires the variety of strategies to cope with non-equivalence at word level. The frequency of each translation strategy was resulted from the following factors; the poetic form of song lyrics, the differences of language constructions between Thai and English, and socio-culture of the source text and the target text.

Discussion

The findings of this study disclosed that subject and object pronouns were frequently omitted in the song lyrics. This finding was supported by the study of Wisedsook (2002) as subject and object pronouns could be omitted in translation of song lyrics. One of several factors that results in omitting subject and object pronouns was the limited space in a song phrase. It is also stated that this omission could be done when it causes no confusion to the target audiences. In a study of translation of song lyrics by Akerstrom (2009), it was found that the strategy of paraphrase was the most common translation strategy used. The highly use of translation by paraphrasing of Akerstrom (2009) is rather consistent with the findings of this study. This is because, the application of translation by paraphrase using unrelated words and translation by paraphrase using a related word were found at high frequency in this study.

As song lyrics are written in the same pattern as poem, Onsomboon’s (2007) study of poetry translation from English to Thai was also investigated to find relevance to this study. Differently to this study, the results of his study revealed that translation by omission was found at a low frequency. The results of his study indicated that translation by paraphrase using related words and translation by using a more neutral or less expressive word were the most frequently found strategies. However, the finding of his study is similar to this study that translation by illustration was not found.

Recommendations

1. General Suggestions

The study might be beneficial for people who enjoy listening to English songs and their translated versions as it will enable those audiences to feel appreciative to aesthetic value of the songs. The teachers could make use of translation strategies of song lyrics into translation courses to provide better understanding on how words in song lyrics are translated into the target language.
2. Suggestions for Future Study

2.1 Since the study emphasised the translation strategies at word level in song lyrics without considering the musical factors of the songs, there should be a further study which analyses song lyrics by taking the musical factors into consideration. The future finding would yield more specific details on how the translator incorporates the translation strategy with the musical factors.

2.2 There should be a study of the translation of song lyrics in other levels such as idiomatic level, grammatical level, discourse level, and so on. All findings would benefit the teachers, students, translators, as well as those who are interested in song translation.

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