

Characteristics and C-E Translation Methods of the Four-Character Frame in the Subtitles of the Documentary *Daming Palace*

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Abstract

This paper studies the four-character frame in the subtitle of the documentary *Daming Palace*, aiming to provide a reference for the translation of the documentary four-character case as well as better spread Chinese culture. By analyzing, researching and summarizing the subtitle of *Daming Palace* and reading a lot of literature, the author has found that in *Daming Palace* the four-character frame is characterized by the use of the absolute four-character frames and the recurrence of some four-character frames, and that C-E translation methods of the four-character frame are mainly literal translation, free translation, provincial translation and concise translation.

Keywords

Documentary Subtitles, Four-Character Frame, English Translation

1. Introduction

As a historical documentary, it portrays the prosperity of the Tang Dynasty and shows the grandeur and ambition of the era [1]. It is an important channel for foreigners to understand Chinese history and an important means for the Chinese to promote their glorious history and culture. At present, the Belt and Road cooperation is becoming closer and closer, and economic globalization is penetrating every corner of the world. As a documentary reproducing the prosperous Tang Dynasty, *Daming Palace* undertakes the postcards of our history and culture. Therefore, it is necessary to study and explore the translation of its subtitles and draw general rules.

After searching on CNKI, Wanfang Database and Duxiu Academic Search, the author finds that there is plenty of literature on the English translation of the

four-character frame, some from the perspective of literary works, some from the perspective of political texts, some from the perspective of medicine and so on. However, the author finds that there are two problems in the study of the four-character frame. One is that there are very few researches on four-character frames from the perspective of documentary subtitles; the other is that there are very few researches on *Daming Palace*. Therefore, through the analysis and research on the English translation of the four-character frame, this paper summarizes features of the four-character frame of the documentary *Daming Palace* and the general methods of the English translation.

2. Features of the Four-Character Frame of the Documentary, *Daming Palace*

2.1. Many Four-Character Frames Expressing Absoluteness

The economic base determines the superstructure. The economic prosperity of the Tang dynasty contributed to the development of politics, diplomacy and the military. The Tang dynasty was the most powerful state of its time, thanks to Kaiyuan flourishing age and Governance during the Zhenguan Reign. As a result, the social and economic prosperity of the time is reflected in much use of the four-character frame expressing absoluteness.

There are many many four-character frames expressing absoluteness in the documentary *Daming Palace*, such as “绝无仅有、威震天下、独一无二、千载难逢、至高无上、前所未有、前无古人，后无来者、举世无双、旷世奇才、登峰造极、空前绝后、高不可攀”。

Example 1:

这是唐朝历史上**绝无仅有**的惊天大案。

It was an **unprecedented** murder case.

Analysis: “绝无仅有” means only one and very rare. After the An Lushan Rebellion, the Tang Dynasty went from prosperity to decline. It is translated into “unprecedented”, expressing that the Tang Dynasty was deeply affected by this event with a short and powerful style, as well as strong absoluteness.

Example 2:

这个日后**威震天下**的女人开始执掌当时世界上最大的帝国。

This **ambitious** woman effectively started her rule of the empire in the world.

Analysis: The phrase “威震天下” means that everyone in the world knew of her power, and it is an apt description of Wu Zetian, as she was the first female emperor of China, representing the peak of power that women could achieve in ancient China. “Ambitious” expresses Wu Zetian’s ideal, and also implies that her future would be smooth, which is also a word of absoluteness.

2.2. The Recurrence of Some Four-Character Frames

The Chinese language prefers to use four characters, because the four-character

frame gives an aesthetic sense of rhyme, which is catchy to read, and the recurrence of the four-character grid is particularly impressive. The repeated occurrence of positive words such as “独一无二”, “至高无上”, “叱咤风云” and “蒸蒸日上” visually indicates the strength of the Tang Empire.

Example 1:

但是，她身上真正独一无二的，是对权利无边无际的渴望。

But her insatiable hunger for power was what **made her stand apart**.

Example 2:

在中国历史上这是独一无二的纪录。

It was a feat **unparalleled** in Chinese history.

Example 3:

在中国历史上武则天是独一无二的。

This was a **unique** woman in Chinese history.

Example 4:

独一无二的大唐精神，培育出了无比绚烂的艺术之花。

The **unique** culture of the Tang Dynasty gave rise to a period of artistic exuberance.

Example 5:

麟德殿的造型是独一无二的。

Linde was **unique**.

Analysis: “独一无二” appears five times in the subtitles of *Daming Palace*. “Unique” means very special, like nothing else. In Example 1, “独一无二” is translated as “made her stand apart” to express Wu Zetian’s desire for power; in Example 2, it is translated as “unparalleled”, describing Wu Zetian as an empress ruling the most prosperous country in the world at the time; in Example 3, Example 4 and “Example 5”, it indicates the uniqueness of Wu Zetian herself, the spirit of the Tang dynasty and the Hall of Linde. The recurrence of “unique” shows the prosperity of the Tang dynasty and it appears many times in the subtitles of the documentary *Daming Palace*, playing an emphatic role.

3. The English Translation Methods of the Four-Character Frame of the Subtitles of *Daming Palace*

Language is a special social phenomenon and the result of the long-term abstraction of people’s cognitive and thinking activities, which is consolidated through the composition of words and sentences and becomes a tool for people’s intercourse and socialized development [2]. As a representative work of Chinese historical and construction documentary, there is no lack of the use of four-character frames in subtitles of *Daming Palace*. The use of the four-character frame not only conforms to the principles of simplicity and accuracy in the Chinese translation of documentary subtitles, but also has the beauty of form and sound, and

is literary and artistic, which can not only meet the aesthetic needs of Chinese viewers but also vividly and imaginatively express the imagery function of the original text [3]. In this paper, by researching the subtitles of the documentary *Daming Palace*, the author finds that the translation methods of the four-character frame are mainly literal translation, free translation, provincial translation, and concise translation.

3.1. The Method of Literal Translation

The literal translation is a translation method that maintains both the content and the form of the original text. Literal translation needs to faithfully convey the semantic content of the original text, while also ensuring its communicative function, stylistic style and interesting tone [4]. When the four-character frame in Chinese is relatively simple and easy to understand, it is better to use the translation method of literal translation. The advantage of the literal translation method is that it can retain the meaning of the original language as much as possible, which is conducive to the outreach of the source language culture and facilitates readers to understand Chinese culture. In the translation process of Chinese four-character frames, if working, the literal translation method should be considered first.

Example 1:

唐玄宗真心希望自己能够和心爱的女人飞越人间，在月宫中**长生不老**。

Xuanzong wished that he and his love could **turn into immortals and live eternally on the moon**.

Analysis: The term “长生不老” was originally used in Taoism to refer to eternal life or immortality; it was later used as a wish for the elderly. Immortality is the dream of many people at all times and all over the world. The Chinese legendary Peng Zu lived to be 800 years old and the Western Adam in Bible lived to be 930 years old, which is surprisingly consistent regardless of country. Therefore, immortality has a common cultural tendency between China and the West, and the translation of “长生不老” into “turn into immortals and live eternally” in the example can also resonate with the readers.

Example 2:

根据大唐的律法，皇帝驾崩之后，没有生育过的嫔妃必须出家，或进入道观，或**皈依佛门**。

The laws of Tang stipulated that after an emperor's death, the concubines without children must **move to a Taoist or Buddhist temple**.

Analysis: “皈依佛门” is a procedure of a man to become a Buddhist, and “皈依” is the first step in the Buddhist path. As one of the three major religions of the world, Buddhism has a very high reputation in the world, so here the four-character frame “皈依佛门” is directly translated into “move to a Buddhist temple” by the literal translation.

3.2. The Method of Free Translation

Free translation refers to translating according to the general meaning of the original text, without translating word by word. The translation text should be faithful to the basic content of the original while trying to be different [5]. When the four-character form of a Chinese text does not require a translation of its original meaning, the translator can use the free translation method, which can reduce the distance between the translation and the reader, enhance the readability of the translation and facilitate understanding.

Example 1:

所有的荣耀都是**过眼云烟**，只有爱情和艺术是永恒的。

While glory is **temporary**, love and art are eternal.

Analysis: “过眼云烟” is a metaphor for things outside the body that do not need to be valued or for things that disappear easily. “Temporary” is concise and easy to understand.

Example 2:

唐玄宗继位后，梨园**一枝独秀**。

After Xuanzong took power, Pear Garden gradually **overshadowed** the others.

Analysis: “一枝独秀” refers to the fact that there is only one of the flowers in bloom, which is a metaphor, expressing superior skills and obvious advantages. It is not directly translated into “was like the only flower in the Tang dynasty”, but “overshadow”, meaning that someplace is more famous than elsewhere, like clouds covering up the sky, which is in line with the English idiom.

3.3. The Method of Provincial Translation

By provincial translation, we mean omitting repetitive and superfluous words in the translation without changing the meaning of the original text or replacing the cumbersome expressions in the original text with concise and clear language. The purpose of provincial translation is to make the translation smooth and fluent and express the content of the original text in concisely [6].

When the meaning expressed in the four-character frame in Chinese is obvious or there is the repetition of the meaning, the translator can use the provincial translation method, which is related to the difference between the Chinese and English languages. Chinese likes repeating, sometimes saying the same meaning over and over again, while English does not like repeating, often directly expressing its meaning.

Example 1:

论弥撒和吐蕃使团成员**不知所措**，**目瞪口呆**，大唐的风范只有亲眼目睹才能够感受。

The riches of the Tang Dynasty **were beyond description**, Lunmisa and members of his delegation were dazed by the magnificence of Tang.

Analysis: In this example, both “不知所措” and “目瞪口呆” are used to describe the surprise of Lunmisa and members of his delegation at the prosperous Tang Dynasty. “不知所措” is translated into “were beyond description”, while “目瞪口呆” is omitted, because English tends to use specific words to express a thing, and does not like repetition.

Example 2:

至高无上的皇家工程不仅需要兢兢业业的监造者，而且需要一个才华横溢的设计师。

The royal project needed not only a diligent supervisor but also a creative architect.

Analysis: “至高无上” means the highest and is usually used to describe a very high position. The prosperity of the Tang Dynasty was unparalleled at the time, so it was self-evident that the royal project of the time was supreme.

3.4. The Method of Concise Translation

Because of the limited time, screen space, and the limited speed of the reader’s comprehension in the corresponding time, the translation of documentary subtitles should be as simple as possible. The omission of important content can result in an incomplete meaning; therefore the short translation method is appropriate in this case. When there is a meaningful repetition of a four-character frame, or when it can be expressed in a single word (usually a notional word such as an adjective, noun or verb), the translator can use the concise translation method.

Example 1:

帝国日新月异，国库也逐渐丰盈。

As the emperor **advanced**, each passing way brought with it more revenue.

Analysis: The original meaning of “日新月异” is to have daily updates and monthly changes, while the original text describes that the Tang Dynasty is constantly moving forward. Instead of using the original meaning of the word, it is directly translated as “advanced”, which simplifies it, both to express the original meaning briefly and powerfully and to save space when it is displayed in the subtitles.

Example 2:

经过唐玄宗的励精图治，大唐的朝纲开始焕然一新，一个空前的盛世即将到来。

Thanks to the **wisdom** of Emperor Xuanzong, the Tang administration took on a new look.

Analysis: The original meaning of the phrase “励精图治” is that the leader did his utmost to find a way to govern the country well, but the translation is simplified to “wisdom”, which is close to the meaning of the original text and is in line with the simplicity of the subtitle.

4. Conclusion

This paper takes the documentary *Daming Palace* as an example, and summarizes the features of its subtitles and its English translation methods through case studies, to provide a reference for the translation of documentary four-character frames. A text usually involves a variety of translation methods, but this paper only takes the subtitles of the documentary *Daming Palace* as an example, which may be a partial generalization. The author hopes that this paper will stimulate the interest of colleagues in the study of four-character documentary films, and looks forward to the emergence of more in-depth research works. Film and television works carry the cultural connotations of different countries, enriching people's lives and building a bridge of communication between different cultures [7]. There is a wide range of documentary subtitling research so researchers need to work together to find general rules from different perspectives regarding different documentaries, in order to better promote the translation of documentary subtitles and allow foreigners to better understand Chinese culture.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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