

Casas-Tost, H. (2013). Politeness and Audience Response in Chinese-English Subtitling. *The Journal of Specialised Translation*, 19, 154-156. <https://doi.org/10.26034/cm.jostrans.2013.432>

This article is publish under a *Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International* (CC BY):
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>



© Helena Casas-Tost, 2013

Yuan, Xiaohui (2012). *Politeness and Audience Response in Chinese-English Subtitling*. Col. New trends in Translation Studies. Vol. 10, Bern et al: Peter Lang, pp. 236, 41€. ISBN: 9783034307321

Although Audiovisual Translation (AVT) has only recently consolidated as an independent area of research within Translation Studies, it has attracted many researchers' attention, especially in the past few years, with abundant publications covering a wide range of topics, including contributions on the study of linguistics and translation aspects of audiovisual dialogues. In this book Yuan Xiaohui tackles the so far rather neglected issue of face management in AVT and she does it from a double perspective: its representation in subtitling and audience response to it. It is the first study to use Chinese-English language data in examining such a topic and also the first one that has devised audience response experiments to test its findings.

This book is structured in six chapters and complemented with two short appendixes. It starts with an introduction where the research questions and the aims of the book are presented, that is mainly the study of how politeness, and particularly face negotiation, is dealt with when subtitling between Chinese and English and what the response and interpretation of the audience is.

The second chapter offers a theoretical review of the two research areas that are pertinent to the scope of the book: face management, on the one hand, and subtitling, on the other. In both areas Yuan Xiaohui gives the reader a broad vision of each of the topics, including the research done by Chinese scholars and her criticisms to it. Although this may seem obvious and absolutely necessary, it has unfortunately not always been the norm in the area of Chinese Studies and, therefore, deserves to be highlighted.

As for face management, and politeness in general, the author first offers a survey of the developments in research in the West and in Far East cultures and then presents her own conceptualisation of relationship management in intercultural and cross-cultural communication. She establishes a composite model of face management, which includes the strengths of Brown and Levinson's (1987) notion of *face*, Spencer-Oatey's (2000) rapport management theory and also incorporates important cultural underpinnings, considered to be key in order to better understand people's conflict and rapport management characteristics in different and distant cultures such as those of the UK and China. Even though I agree with her in the importance of taking into account cultural variables, I believe that the differences she points out between volition and discernment call for deeper analysis and explanation. A brief review on subtitling from the perspective of face management closes the chapter.

Once again, the element that deserves special attention are the references the author makes regarding technical criteria for Chinese subtitling, which will surely be appreciated by those working in AVT and having Chinese as a working language, since not much scholarly research has been published in this respect.

In chapter three the methodology and the corpus used in the study are presented. After formulating the author's theoretical composite model, she makes a brief description of her working corpus, made up of three American films and two Chinese ones, and their corresponding translations. In order to support or correct the findings resulting from the application of this model to the corpus and give the most accurate picture of reception and response towards face management in subtitling, she also presents the design of her audience response experiments. These were conducted with six Chinese and six British subjects, using one-on-one interviews as the major method for eliciting and collecting responses. Despite the fact that the sample is not very big and that one could certainly argue that it would have been better to select American subjects for the experiment rather than British, following the author's emphasis on the importance of culture, I believe that such an experimental tool is still useful and makes this study ground-breaking in the context of Translation Studies and at the same time makes its findings more solid and meaningful.

The following two chapters make up the main body of the book, with the analysis of the face interactions found in selected Chinese and English film sequences as well as their representation in the corresponding subtitles in chapter four, and the results from the audience response tests, in chapter five.

With a very detailed analysis of a few sequences of each film in chapter four, the author points out the two most salient features regarding face representation in subtitling in this language pair from the data of the corpus. First, absence of face markers and, second, changes in face strategies. She argues that such omissions and alterations in subtitles may impact on the viewers' interpretations of characters' personality, attitude and intentions. The results of audience response tests in relation with two sequences presented in chapter five prove such a hypothesis. Despite the fact that audience responses show that viewers who rely on subtitles do have a good understanding of the thematic content of the film sequences, results show that they gain a significantly different impression of the interlocutors' personality, attitude and intentions than those of native audiences. At the same time, they also demonstrate that the nature of the power relations between interlocutors changes from the original to the subtitled version.

Examining the answers in the response tests in detail, the author reaches another important conclusion as for the shaping of viewers' interpretation

of characters and their interrelations. She concludes that other aspects, such as body language and paralinguistic cues, are also crucial in face management and the viewers' understanding of face interactions. Since such extralinguistic elements of communication are culturally bound, the author argues that audiences of distant cultures can fail to capture such features and that subtitles should take this issue into account. Nevertheless, no suggestions are made as to how such a question could be tackled, neither are there ideas about how subtitles could represent face markers and changes of face strategies in order to avoid misinterpretations. In the light of subtitles time and spatial constraints, it would have been interesting to see a few examples of how subtitlers could include such information. However, these issues are not completely neglected, but left for future research in AVT in the sixth and last chapter of the book.

In sum, this book opens a new research line in AVT, investigating how face management is dealt with in subtitling between English and Chinese. Therefore, it bridges together Intercultural Studies and Translation Studies and can be useful to anyone interested in these two disciplines, with a particular appeal those who call for experimental studies, especially in AVT. In this sense, it constitutes an important step to support Mason's (2009) claim of how useful research on reader and audience response in Translation Studies is.

References

Brown, Penelope & Levinson, Stephen C. 1987. *Politeness. Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mason, Ian 2009. "Translator Moves and Reader Response: the Impact of Discoursal Shifts in Translation." In B. Ahrens et al. (eds) *Translationwissenschaftliches Kolloquium*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 55-70.

Spencer-Oatey, Helen 2000. *Culturally Speaking: Managing Rapport Through Talk Across Cultures*. London: Continuum.

**Helena Casas-Tost, Grup de Recerca Inter-Asia/TXICC
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain**

E-mail: Helena.Casas@uab.cat