

# On the Deviating Effect of the English Translations of Rhetorical Movie Lines --- A Case Study of *Hi, Mom*

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**Abstract:** Lines are considered the main means used by scriptwriters to show plots, depict characters and embody themes. Various figures of speech are employed in lines to enhance their expressiveness and functions by deviating from zero degree as a base point. Taking the movie *Hi, Mom*, this paper analyzes the deviating effect of the English translations of rhetorical lines at the four levels of morphology, syntax, semantics and logic. According to the analysis, the use of figures of speech in these English lines can achieve the same deviating effect as that of rhetorical Chinese lines; on the other hand, the original deviating effect will be absent from the translations without the application of rhetorical means. Therefore, it is better for translators to adopt rhetorical devices when translating rhetorical lines, which will play a vital role in the success of movies in overseas markets.

**Keywords:** Lines; zero and deviation theory; figures of speech.

## 1. Introduction

With the development of economy and information technology, the number of movies is increasing rapidly. Therefore, it depends on many factors that a movie expects to beat many competitors and fascinate audiences. One of those factors is lines which always employ a wide range of rhetorical means to improve their effectiveness and give full play to their functions of shaping characters, revealing plots, and indicating actions. Correspondingly, the translation of the movie lines with figures of speech has a great impact on whether a movie can become successful in overseas markets. In other words, it matters much that the lines retain the deviating effect of their rhetorical means in the target language.

When it comes to the deviating effect, another term “zero-degree” is always associated with it. “Zero-degree” was originally the unit for measuring temperature in thermodynamics, and then was gradually introduced into literature, linguistics and other fields by Chinese and foreign scholars. In the 1960s, Roland Barthes put forward the concept of “zero degree” in his writings such as *Le degré zéro de l’écriture* to exclude the author’s attitude and emotional expression in a straightforward writing, a neutral writing. In 1966, Jean Cohen introduced this concept into rhetoric in *Structure du langage poétique*, in which he distinguished “absolute zero” from “relative zero”. In the 1970s, Group  $\mu$  in Belgium pointed out in rhetoric research that “zero-degree language” is “simple” and has no affectation or implied meanings in its application. The zero linguistic form is “the norm composed of all factors included in language code, such as orthography, grammar, basic word meanings, logical rules, etc.”, and rhetorical means are the deviation from zero [1]. Plus, they also distinguished between “absolute zero” and “actual zero”. In fact, Group  $\mu$ ’s deviation theory is discussed in the context of poetic language and emphasizes the opposition between zero and deviation.

The deviation theory has not only evolved in foreign academic circles, but also has had corresponding and different development in China. As early as 1930s, Professor Wang Yi and Professor Chen Wangdao, two rhetorical theorists, both adopted “zero-degree” as a base point to elaborate specific rhetorical phenomena, and involved linguistic deviation with the term “below

zero". However, neither of them theorized the concepts of "zero" and "deviation" [2]. In the 1970s, Mr. Wang Xijie advanced the deviation theory, which was used to construct the theoretical framework of Chinese rhetoric. He made a distinction between "theoretical zero" and "operational zero", attaching great importance to the relationship and mutual transformation between zero and deviation. He also created a set of concepts: the positive deviation and the negative deviation, which is not included in Group  $\mu$ 's deviation theory. According to Mr. Wang, the negative deviation is a linguistic error while the positive deviation is an acceptable and beautiful one [3].

To sum up, the employment of rhetorical means in actual speech is a deviation from the language as the base point, thus achieving some unusual effects which is also the purpose of movie lines adopting various figures of speech. The English translation of such lines should also highlight their deviating effect so that the movie will possess the same appeal to audiences abroad.

When it was shown in the first half of last year, the Chinese movie *Hi, Mom* gained a high reputation in China, to which the deviating effect of the rhetorical means contained in the lines contributed greatly. The movie has been released in other countries and regions, so the deviating effect of the English translations of figures of speech in lines is also one of the key factors for its success in English-speaking countries. Taking the movie for example, this paper will explore the rhetorical deviating effect of the English version of movie lines.

## 2. Deviation in the English Translations of Rhetorical Lines

The movie *Hi, Mom* utilizes a lot of rhetorical means in its lines, which deviate from the conventional zero expressions in four aspects: morphology, syntax, semantics and logic, enhancing the expressiveness of lines and contributing greatly to the characterization, the revealing and developing of plot. Then, the English translations corresponding to the figures of speech in the lines also need to achieve the same deviating effect in order to perform the functions of the original lines.

### 2.1 The English Translation of Lexical Figures of Speech

Lexical figures of speech appear at the lexical level or in units smaller than words. A few lexical figures of speech are used in the lines of this movie. For example,

Original: 都说女儿是妈妈的小棉袄.....但我可能是我妈的貂。

Transaltion: They say a daughter is like a vest to her mother.... but I think I'm like a fur coat.

The expression “女儿是妈妈的小棉袄” is used to describe a daughter's consideration for her parents, who feel warm as if they were wearing cotton-padded jackets. This metaphor has been accepted by the public and become a relatively fixed expression. In the second half of this Chinese aside by one heroine Ling, “小棉袄” is replaced by “貂”, forming the figure of specch---parody. After this aside, the nurse reported that the heroine weighed nine pounds at birth. Seeing this, the audience can't help smiling. It turns out that the heroine Ling used “貂” to show that she was much heavier than other baby girls at birth. “小棉袄” and “貂” in the original line are respectively expressed in English as “a vest” and “a fur coat”, which constitute antithesis since one of the clothes is thin and the other is heavy. Although the translation does not retain parody of the original line, the use of antithesis makes the aside lively and interesting, highlighting the feature of the appearance of the heroine who has been robust since childhood. Therefore, it can be said that the use of antithesis has achieved the deviating effect in the original line.

Here is another example,

Original: 你叭叭起来没完了。

Translation: Do you ever shut up?

When the characters Wang Qin and Li Huanying lined up to buy TV sets that were scarce at that time, they tried every means to stand closer to the counter until Wang Qin finally broke out in anger. After saying this line to Li Huanying, she began to wrestle with her. “叭叭” is an onomatopoeia, originally used to describe the sound of lips opening and closing, and here it refers to the behavior

of “speaking”, so this line adopts onomatopoeia. The onomatopoeic word “叭叭” deviates from its original usage, but it vividly depicts Li Huanying’s performance in the dialogue at that time, keeping up talking, which made Wang Qin speechless and then come to blows. As soon as the audience hear Wang Qin’s words, they will immediately realize that she no longer wants to quarrel with Li and is about to fight. Therefore, not only does the use of onomatopoeia boost the expressiveness of lines, but also the characteristic of Li Huanying’s eloquence becomes more distinct. What’s more, it also hints at the development of the plot.

On the other hand, rather than onomatopoeia there is a rhetorical question in the English translation of this line, which deviates from the zero sentence pattern, a declarative sentence. The translation “Do you ever shut up?” is a question in form. Actually, it doesn’t need the other party to answer, but means the other party is chattering. Thus, by using the rhetorical device, the translation achieves the same deviating effect and realizes the same function as the original line.

## 2.2 The English Translation of Syntactic Figures of Speech

Instead of specific words, syntactic figures of speech lead to greater vividness and expressiveness of the actual speech with word combinations, clauses and sentence groups. The lines in this movie contain some figures of speech such as antithesis, contrast, rhetorical questions, etc. There is a line that includes antithesis as follows.

Original: 别的孩子第一句话，不是爸爸就是妈妈，而我…… “再来一碗！”

Translation: Their first word was supposed to be daddy or mommy, while mine was “more”.

The using of parallel structures forms antithesis in this line, which points out that the first sentence “I” (the character Ling) have acquired is different from that learned by other children. The English translation also forms antithesis by connecting the two clauses with the conjunctive while, only to deviate from the conventional structure of a declarative sentence as the zero pattern. In this way, it is highlighted that “I” loved eating especially since I was a child so that I was quite fat. Rather than using this rhetorical device, the translation with an ordinary sentence pattern would not impress the audience in an interesting and funny way, let alone the shaping of the character image.

The following example also delivers a similar idea.

Original: 那是喝绿茶吗？那是炫耀表呢！

Translation: she is not drinking green tea. she is showing off her watch.

The character Wang Qin has a strong sense of superiority and jumps at every chance to show off. At the party to celebrate Ling’s admission to the university, Wang Qin raised her hand to drink green tea at the entrance to the hall to show off her wrist watch. Li Huanying’s good friend Aunt Bao saw this and said, “那是喝绿茶吗？”. It sounds like a question, but Aunt Bao immediately gives the answer “那是炫耀表呢！”, so this line resorts to a rhetorical question which is an abnormal sentence for deviating from the zero pattern. This syntactic deviation demonstrates Aunt Bao’s disdain for Wang Qin’s ostentatious behavior, together with the characteristics of Wang Qin from Aunt Bao’s perspective. At the same time, it also interprets Wang Qin’s intention to show off her watch, displaying the behavioral function of the line.

The English version of this line is composed of two declarative sentences, without retaining the rhetorical device. However, both declarative sentences possess the subject-predicate-object structure. One of them is negative while the other is affirmative, which constitutes antithesis for their contrastive meanings. Therefore, this translation achieves the same deviating effect as that of the original line.

## 2.3 The English Translation of Semantic Figures of Speech

A semantic figure of speech is intended to express an idea vividly with semantic deviation, i.e., adopting the transferred meaning of a word instead of its original one.

In the movie, when Ling travelled back to the space where her mother Li Huanying was young, the factory volleyball match was coincidentally about to take place. She recalled that Aunt Bao in

the original space told her that her mother and other teammates missed a wonderful thing for not taking part in the match, so she persuaded them to participate in it for that good thing. Nonetheless, the other players didn't show up at the appointed place except Yumei, who had made it clear that there would be something good for them but also said to them, "no one begs you to come, but never come if you don't." This is contrary to the purpose of persuading other players to participate, and will even prevent them from doing so. In this case, Ling said, "玉梅, 你真是从来没让人失望过".

In fact, this line implies that Yumei is very disappointing for her failure to persuade other players to take part in the match. Therefore, this line is ironic, which deviates from its literal meaning to show Ling's great disappointment. Meanwhile, it also tells the audience of the other players not showing up, performing the function of revealing plots. When translating this line into English, the translator adopts the literal translation. Thus, the translation of "Yumei, my dear, you never fail to impress me" retains irony in the original line, which easily gets across to the audience with the context to achieve the same effect as the original line.

Another example says, Shen Guanglin, the factory director's son, decided to go to Shenzhen after failing to establish a romantic relationship with Li Huanying. When Ling wished him a safe journey, he replied, "放心吧, 前路再坎坷, 我也会把它趟平." Shen Guanglin materializes his unknown future with the expression "前路", whose literal meaning is the road ahead. "坎坷" is used to refer to the difficulties and setbacks that may occur in his future life; "我也会把它趟平", which reflects his confidence in the future and determination to overcome difficulties. The application of metaphor in this line causes semantic deviation, vividly depicting the new image of Shen Guanglin after the transformation.

The English translation of this line is "put your mind at ease. I'll make it safe come what may", which does not keep metaphor used in the original line but employs partial inversion in the adverbial clause "come what may", an idiomatic expression, whose word order deviates from the normal one (namely subject + predicate). Although partial inversion falls into syntactic figures of speech, it puts emphasis on Shen Guanglin's courage and determination in the face of the unpredictable future by placing the main verb "come" before the subject "what".

## 2.4 The English Translation of Semantic Figures of Speech

A Logical figure of speech refers to an illogical linguistic expression, which is reasonable and necessary at a higher level to enhance expressiveness.

In the movie, in order to please her parents, Ling had the admission notice of a university for high school graduates faked to take the place of her own admission notice of the university for adults. The agent assured her that the false notice appeared to be authentic, saying "办假证的师傅用他的人品跟我担保, 谁也看不出来." As is known to everyone, it is illegal to make false certificates and counterfeiters themselves are naturally immoral. Therefore, the counterfeiter's guarantee with his honor violates the logic rule constituting paradox, but it insinuates this illegal act and foreshadows the subsequent plot of the false notice's final exposure. The English version of this line is: "The forger guy promised me on his honor that no one could tell the difference", which retains paradox included in the original line as a result of literal translation. Correspondingly, it achieves the same deviating effect as the original line.

In addition to paradox, other figures of speech employed in the lines violate one of the cooperative principles---the quality maxim. For example,

Original: 你说我当你一回女儿, 连让你高兴一次都没做过。

Translation: I'm a lousy daughter, who has never even made you proud once.

At the beginning of the movie, the mother Li Huanying had a car accident while driving her daughter Ling home on her bicycle after the celebration party. Ling knelt in front of the hospital bed, saying the line to her unconscious mother. However, it is not the case that she never made her mother happy. In asides, Ling said that she had troubled her mother many times when she was a child, but there was also a time when she did something to allow her mother to be proud of, that is,

she took the first place in running at primary school. Therefore, the information contained in this line is obviously not true by narrowing down the facts. Deviating from the zero facts, this line adopts the rhetorical device of hyperbole, aiming to convey Ling's guilt about having done so few things her mother took pride in rather than to give false information for deception. Furthermore, the use of hyperbole makes a strong impression on the audience, and paves the way for the main plot --- Ling spared no effort to make her mother happy when she went back to the space where her mother was still young as a single woman. Such is the function of revealing the plot this line has played in the movie. When translating the second half of this line, the translator adopts literal translation by using the three words "never", "even" and "once" so that the translated information is completely consistent with that of the original line, thus retaining hyperbole and achieving the deviating effect of the original line.

### 3. Summary

Varieties of figures of speech contained in Hi, Mom's lines lead to deviations in morphology, syntax, semantics and logic, which greatly boost both the expressiveness and the functions of the lines themselves. Some figures of speech make the characters more distinctive, some display the plots more vividly, and others strengthen the behavioral function of the lines. According to the above analysis, most of the English translations of lines in this movie effectively enhance the expressiveness of the lines as well as their functions by either retaining the original rhetorical means or adopting other rhetorical ones in place of the original ones. Thus, the English versions of these lines also contain a wide range of figures of speech, achieving the same deviating effect as the original lines.

However, there are still a few lines in the movie containing figures of speech that are discarded in the English translations. Accordingly, the deviating effect of these rhetorical devices is lost in these English lines.

For example, Ling told in the asides at the beginning of the movie: "直到后来我才发现, 原来, 女大十八变——是骗人的". "女大十八变" is the first half a common saying whose second half is "越变越好看" that is often to be omitted in use. This saying means a girl will become beautiful when she grows up. But it is used to refer to Ling's academic performance in the movie. Therefore, when there is a pause after Ling's words of "女大十八变", the audience probably expect that she will perform better in studies when she is at senior high school than at junior high school. However, the following line "是骗人的" shows that Ling's academic performance has remained poor till she is at senior high school. This reversal effect is brought about due to the fact that the narrator's pause after telling "女大十八变" did not give enough information, forming a figure of speech of abnormal quantity.

Since there is no corresponding expression in English for the saying, the line is translated freely as "It was till much later that I realize that, as it turns out, not every little girl...grows up to be more beautiful." It is a pity that no reversal is produced despite the pause after the part "not every little girl" is delivered. Maybe it is better to translate the saying as "not every ugly duckling" for the story entitled *The Ugly Duckling*, in which a baby swan mistaken for an ugly duckling grew up to be beautiful, is well known in English-speaking countries.

In conclusion, the translator had better apply rhetorical means when translating those in the movie lines so that the translations can have the same deviating effect as the original lines, thus laying the foundation for the success of movies in international markets.

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