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An eye-tracking study on the audience reception and processing of English-Chinese swearwords in films

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Abstract

Driven by technological advances and empirical turn in audiovisual translation studies (AVT), the current study employed a process-oriented approach to investigate how audiences receive and cognitively process translated swearwords in films. An eye-tracking experiment collected data from 150 participants watching four film clips and allocating them into one of the five subtitling groups: four experimental groups with four different translation strategies of swearwords ranging from low to high profanity, and one control group with only original English same-language subtitles. Established measures of Total Fixation Count, Total Fixation Duration, Mean Fixation Duration, Time to First Fixation were analysed using one-way ANOVA. These eye-tracking results showed no significant difference of swearword translation strategies on processing and reception in general. The original hypothesis that the lower the level of offensiveness is, the greater mean fixation counts and durations would be triggered, was thus rejected. Participants also reported functional awareness of swearwords, which helped them understand characters' emotions and feelings. As a result, they had an expectation for a more authentic translation of swearwords that closely reflected the daily life of the target audience.