

Review Article

On Film Subtitle Translation from the Perspective of Communicative Translation —A Case Study of *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*

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Abstract: Continued economic globalization, international cultural integration and rapid technological development have led to a boom in the multimedia industry. Film and TV drama is one of the primary approaches for foreign cultural communication, and subtitle translation is a crucial part of ensuring the effectiveness of cultural communication. *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, a national comic masterpiece, has successfully won the 2019 box office championship and ranked second in China's box office history, becoming the "light of national comics" and successfully going out of China to the world. Based on the rich cultural information contained in this film with Chinese characteristics, this essay takes Peter Newmark's communicative translation as the theoretical framework, and some subtitles of the film *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* as the corpus. It summarizes the three principles of accuracy, conciseness, and instantaneous readability embodied in the subtitles from the perspective of communicative translation. According to this, this thesis draws some experience and finds suitable strategies for film subtitle translation, providing assistance to subtitle translators, with a view to enriching translation research in this field.

Keywords: Subtitle translation, communicative translation theory, cultural communication.

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INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, China's comprehensive national power and international status are increasing day by day. Countries around the world are increasingly concerned about China's development process, not only about the rise of China's hard power, but also want to have a deeper understanding of China's history and culture. Additionally, China wishes to share its culture with the rest of the globe, so that China's traditional and excellent culture can go to the world smoothly. Film and TV works are the media closest to people's life, and they exhibit unique benefits in the process of cultural exchange, and subtitle translation serves as an important bridge for the foreign dissemination of film and TV works.

2019 witnessed the release of the film *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* in mainland China. The film depicts the uplifting story of Nezha's struggle to escape from his fate of being born a demon, reflecting Nezha's spiritual character of being more courageous and never giving up. Subtitle translation plays a crucial role in the

process of foreign communication of domestic movies, which should not only accurately convey the original text's meaning while also taking the target language receiver's cultural background into account, so as to minimize the obstacles in the process of cultural communication. Taking partial subtitle translation of movies as an example, this paper focuses on the guiding role of Newmark's communicative translation theory in subtitle translation of movies and TV dramas. It is argued that in the process of subtitle translation, although the emphasis of semantic translation and communicative translation are different, they are by no means completely opposed to each other, but complement each other. Translators can use transliteration and direct translation techniques under the guidance of semantic translation; under the guidance of communicative translation, substitution, amplification, omission and adaptation strategies are used. When the translator should bear in mind that the semantic translation and communicative translation should not be completely isolated, but should be flexibly combined, otherwise the translation quality will

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be affected. As a consequence, translators are supposed to adopt them flexibly in specific translation practice.

An overview of Chinese animation movies

In the context of the growing maturity of the film industry and the widespread use of high-tech, especially digital technology in film production, animation films, which rely heavily on technology, have developed greatly in recent years, with an ever-expanding audience, an increasingly wide influence and a significantly enhanced status. China has extremely rich myths and legends and a huge volume of folk tales, which are the treasure trove of materials needed for the development of domestic animation films, and can also highlight the nationalized characteristics of Chinese animation films. From the first animated feature film *Princess Iron Fan* produced by the Wan Brothers to recent films such as *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, it can be seen that a large number of Chinese animated films are adaptations of traditional historical culture, especially classic myths and folk tales. As foreign audiences do not understand China's history and traditional culture, translators need to consider two factors when translating such films into English. One is to preserve the original form and flavor and not completely translate word to word; The second is to consider the needs of the receptors and convey the meaning of source text in an accurate and smooth manner.

An introduction to subtitles

Subtitles play an important role in audiovisual productions by providing simultaneous transcription and interpretation for the viewer. Therefore, this section will introduce the definition, types and features of subtitles.

Definition of subtitles

Subtitle to most people is "the word printed or superimposed on a film in a foreign language to translate what is being said on the sound track" (Asher & Simpson, 1994).

Gottlieb reckoned that subtitles were "the rendering in a different language of a verbal message in filmic media, in the shape of one or more lines of written text presented on the screen in synch with the original verbal message" (Gottlieb, 2004). In addition, he believes that although excellent subtitle translation may not necessarily save a disappointing movie, in contrast, an excellent movie can be destroyed due to poor subtitles.

As defined by Shuttleworth and Cowie, the practice of producing synchronized subtitles for movie and television conversations is known as subtitling (Shuttleworth & Cowie, 2004).

Tan Zaixi believes that subtitles refer to the terminology which is used to achieve different language

conversions in the translation of film and TV series (Tan Zaixi, 2005).

Du Zhifeng and others mentioned in their works that "subtitles are generally used to present dialogue or narration in a film in the form of text, and to help the audience understand the dialogue content and other information" (Du Zhifeng, 2013).

Briefly, it can be concluded that subtitles function as text presented at the bottom of the screen to help the audience understand and appreciate audiovisual works better.

Classifications of subtitles

Jorge Diaz Cinsas & Aline Remael, in their book *Audiovisual Translation: Subtitles*, classify subtitles into multiple categories, which can be divided into intralingual and interlingual subtitles according to linguistic point of view.

An intralingual subtitle is one whose language matches that of the audio or video production. For example, Cantonese is presented on screen in Mandarin so that the audience can get the message conveyed by the characters. Intralingual subtitle converts the sound of the language into a written form.

As the name suggests, interlingual subtitles appear between different languages, converting dialogue into foreign language text, such as Chinese with English subtitles. Interlingual subtitles can provide more information and facilitate the audience's understanding of the development of the plot. The purpose of interlingual subtitles is to provide supplementary explanations to the foreign language.

Zhang Meifang, the author of *Functional Approaches to Translation Research*, further explains the classification of subtitles: "Intralingual subtitle translation refers to the conversion of discourse into text in the same language; Interlingual subtitles refer to the text that is translated from the source language to the target language and printed at the bottom of the screen while retaining the original sound of the film and television" (Zhang Meifang, 2005). Therefore, the commonly used "subtitle translation" refers to interlingual subtitle translation.

Features of subtitles

Providing information to the audience is the main function of subtitle translation. For instance, present the time, location, and characters in the movie; And even introduce the entire film content; Display the dialogue between characters or reveal the plot. The role of subtitles is especially evident when watching foreign language films. Some viewers need to count on subtitles to understand the storyline of the movie. Consequently, when providing information with subtitles, the following two things are supposed to be done: first, the

information offered by subtitles ought to be consistent with the plot of the movie; second, subtitles should be coherent so that viewers can understand the causes and consequences.

Due to the nature of film and television productions being different from text translation, their translation is also different. Subtitling has its own characteristics. Only by understanding the characteristics of subtitle translation can a translator translate subtitles fluently and successfully. As a consequence, in order to convey the meaning of a film or TV work to the target language receiver, the translator should have a grasp of the features of subtitle translation.

Subtitles are dynamically displayed at the bottom of the screen, they should be synchronized, culturally relevant, and the subtitle language should be colloquial and lifelike.

- (1) The primary feature of subtitling is synchronization. Since sound and vision are combined in a movie, it is crucial that the subtitles match the speech's content and action. To put it simply, in order to avoid audience comprehension issues, the subtitle translation must at the very least be coordinated with the sound and match the performances of the actors.
- (2) Nida believes "that words have their own meaning only when they play a certain role in culture. Therefore, in order to achieve successful translation, sometimes the awareness of biculturalism is even more important than bilingualism" (Nida, 2001). From Nida's perspective, it can be seen that translation is intrinsically linked to culture. Since different nations' cultures are naturally diverse, when a movie is released outside, the cultural factors are also reflected in its subtitle translation.
- (3) In movies, dialogue is mainly about characters, so subtitle translation should be more colloquial. In addition to films adapted from literary works, subtitle translation in films must be closely related to people's life, making it easy for the audience to understand. Because the viewer also has to digest and comprehend images and sounds, subtitle translation cannot take up too much screen time in a movie. To ensure audience comprehension, subtitle translation should be succinct and straightforward.

Research on subtitle translation

The development of the film industry and technological advances have led to the gradual rise of subtitle translation research. The field of subtitle translation has attracted more and more translation scholars and translators. Through their efforts, subtitle

translation research is developing in a diversified direction.

Subtitle translation research abroad

Western scholars began studying the translation of film and television works earlier than Chinese scholars. The late 1950s and early 1960s was when translation studies of Western film and television works first emerged. The study of subtitle translation in Europe began with the publishing of the two works *Traduction and Cinéma* and *Cinéma et Traduction*. After the middle of the 19th century, Western academics started to offer their own suggestions for how to enhance the accuracy of movie subtitle translation and an increasing number of scholars have devoted themselves to subtitle translation research. In 1974, Dollerup wrote an article titled *On Subtitles in Television Programs* that examined the difficulties and mistakes involved in translating English into Danish. Additionally, he made the case for the use of subtitle translation in the study of foreign languages (Dollerup, 1974).

Western film and television translation studies peaked in the 1990s. During this time, translation research theories for film and television made important advancements. Since 1995, there has been a steady increase in theoretical research on subtitle translation in the West, with the research findings of European experts standing out as particularly notable examples.

Gottlieb of Denmark, a pioneer in the translation of movies and television series. He was an early proponent of a series of translation theories and has conducted a relatively thorough study of subtitle translation. Henrik Gottlieb (2001) examines the choices made by translators in Danish subtitles for English-language television programs. He argues that the strong presence of English in almost all world languages has a strong influence on word choice in the target language. Jorge Díaz Cintas is an active scholar in the field of subtitle translation, with a special interest in subtitle translation and its discipline. His book *Audiovisual Translation: Subtitles*, co-authored with Professor Aline Remael in 2007, summarizes the theoretical foundations of subtitle translation and gives examples of difficulties, strategies and techniques in subtitle translation (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2007).

Western academics have recently focused mostly on the cultural and educational significance of subtitle translation. Western scholars' research on subtitle translation has also extended to the field of animated films. For example, in his book *Strategies in Subtitling English Cartoons or Animations*, Mansoor Hosseini (2014) aims to explore the most commonly used animation subtitle strategies for children by comparing six original children's animations and their subtitle versions.

To sum up, because of the early start of foreign subtitle translation, subtitling translation has received increasing attention in the West, and its research is gradually scaled up and systematized. Likewise, the topics and perspectives of subtitling research have become more diverse, including constraints on subtitling translation, translation strategies and theories.

Subtitle translation research at home

Compared to the West, subtitle translation initially received less attention in China. The relevant literature published in journals is also very rare. Contrary to domestic literary translation research, film translation research started relatively late. Screen translations were hardly ever used in China prior to 1949. After 1978, audiovisual translation began to become active, and research in this area also began to become active. However, there is still some groundbreaking research work.

Zhang Chunbai proposed two features of subtitle translation, namely, popularity and immediacy, by concluding the principles and techniques of subtitle translation in *A Preliminary Study of Film and Television Translation* (Zhang Chunbai, 1998). He proposed “that subtitle translation should concentrate on the target language audience and try to adopt free translation as the translation principle.”

The advent of the 21st century has led to advances in Internet technology that have changed the mode of cultural communication. With the birth of more and more video products, an increasing number of scholars in China are dedicating themselves to the research of subtitle translation.

In his paper, Qian Shaochang divided the features of movie subtitles into five categories: audibility, comprehensiveness, immediacy, popularity, and no notes, and summarized seven specific techniques, emphasizing the expressive power of Yan Fu’s triple standard (Qian Shaochang, 2000).

In the article *Strategies for Film and Television Translation*, Li Yunxing analyzed the characteristics of subtitle translation in terms of time and space limits, information functions, and cultural factors. He pointed out that subtitle translation should provide the most relevant information within a limited time and space by adopting appropriate strategies for the target language audience. Through detailed analysis, he further puts forward translation strategies, including omission, interpretation, and free translation (Li Yunxing, 2001).

Dong Haiya pointed out that the research of the best scholars is valuable for domestic scholars to think and learn from their breadth and depth. She outlined the progress and current status of Western audiovisual translation research, and emphasized the

diverse perspectives and academic performance of Western audiovisual translation research (Dong Haiya, 2007).

In recent years, most studies on subtitle translation have been supported by translation theories, such as functional equivalence theory, skopos theory and relevance theory, among which skopos theory is predominant. For example, Kang Yanyan (2012) analyzed the Chinese subtitles of *Avatar* using various translation methods, including addition, deletion, direct translation, and free translation. After the analysis, she found the positive guiding role of skopos theory in subtitle translation.

The above-mentioned studies have made essential contributions to subtitle translation study. However, considering the cultural differences between Chinese and Western cultures and the abundance of other types of translation, subtitle translation still has much room for exploration.

Theoretical Framework

As a renowned translator and translation theorist, Peter Newmark has translated a number of European languages. He is also a linguist who has endeavored to apply from linguistic research to translation practice. He combined translation theory with English theory and put forward his own translation theory, of which the two most notable contributions are text typology and the theory of semantic and communicative translation. This part focuses on Newmark’s communicative translation theory, which is the theoretical basis of this paper.

Background of communicative translation

Newmark holds the opinion that successful translation can be achieved by taking many different aspects into consideration. In order to create his theory of translation, he merged stylistics, discourse analysis, semiotics, functional grammar, and cross-cultural communication theory. Semantic translation theory and communicative translation theory make up the bulk of Newmark’s translation theory and they are the primary parts and main features of his translation theory. Newmark’s two translation theories were pointed out in the context of the ongoing controversy between free translation and direct translation. He argues that both sides who previously indulged in the debate between free and direct translation have ignored a very important point that translation ought to take into account the purpose of translation, the characteristics of readers and the type of text.

In his work *Approaches to Translation*, Peter Newmark put out the ideas of “semantic translation” and “communicative translation.” (Newmark, 2001), breaking away from the problems that have been limited to literal translation and free translation in the translation field for a long time, opening up the

perspective of translation research, which is of great guiding significance for translation research and translation practice. Communicative translation theory and semantic translation theory can be seen as opposites. For example, their translation orientations are different. Semantic translation is oriented towards the original text while communicative translation is translation-oriented. Their focuses are different. Communicative translation concentrates on the feedback of target language receivers. In contrast, semantic translation emphasizes faithfulness to the original text, including word meaning, syntax, article structure, and contextual meaning. Semantic translation is relatively objective and emphasizes accuracy. Communicative translation is more subjective and focuses on the reader's response. In addition to the above differences, semantic translation and communicative translation also have a close internal relationship. When the information to be conveyed in the original work is relatively popular and the knowledge level of the target language reader is similar to that of the original reader, semantic translation and communicative translation are able to be used simultaneously, which is the most ideal way. In all, communicative translation and semantic translation have their respective advantages and disadvantages, and attention should be paid to coordination, otherwise the quality of the translation will be affected.

Introduction of communicative translation

A translation methodology called communicative translation sees translation as a socially specific communicative process. Even though all translation methodologies consider translation to some extent to be a kind of communication, only a communicative translation methodology may be entirely focused on the reader or target receptor.

“Communicative translation attempts to produce on its readers an effect as close as possible to that obtained on the readers of the original.” From Newmark's definition, it can be seen that in communicative translation, The translator should do his best to meet the expectations of the target reader, and the translation should take into account the background of the target language to make it easily acceptable to the target reader. The translation under communicative translation is supposed to be better than the original, and the translator has the right to correct the mistakes in the original and enhance the language. In short, communicative translation is concerned with the reader of the target language. It aims to assist the reader in overcoming reading or communication barriers and achieving effective communication.

The theory of communicative translation has its own traits, which are mainly manifested in the following aspects:

First, the goal of communicative translation theory is to have the reader's reaction be as similar to the reader of the original text as possible. Despite linguistic differences, communicative translation is more concerned with what the source text expresses and how the source text affects the readers of the source language.

Second, communicative translators are loyal to the target readers only. They want to be able to read the translated work easily and effectively, while still having the same communicative impact as readers of the original language. In contrast, semantic translation focuses only on the author and ignores the communicative effect of the readers of the source language.

Third, for the benefit of the readers of the target language, communicative translation ought to follow the grammatical rules of the target language and be easier to understand, more fluid, and clearer. However, it is worth noting that although communicative translation is reader-oriented, it is always based on the original text. The original information should not be added to or subtracted excessively from the perspective of communicative translation. In order to replicate the functionality of the original text, communicative translation seeks to maximize the effectiveness of communication between the original text and readers of the target language.

Application of Communicative Translation to Subtitle Translation

This following part selects representative subtitles in movies for case study, and suggests that subtitle translation should take into account the original text, translation purpose, and audience's feeling. At the same time, the applicability of communicative translation theory in film subtitle translation was elaborated.

Translation of dialects

The Sichuan dialect of the Taiyi Zhenren in *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* is a major feature of this film. Dialects serve as vital cultural information with obvious regional characteristics and cultural connotations, which can cause great difficulties in subtitle translation. Therefore, this situation requires appropriate adjustments and changes under the guidance of communicative translation to reduce communication barriers between the SL and the TL.

原文：巴适。

译文：good stuff.

As Newmark said, it is necessary to clarify its function before translating a dialect. For example, while waiting for Nezha's mother to give birth, Taiyi Zhenren drank a lot of wine and shouted “巴适” while drinking soundly. “巴适” comes from the Sichuan dialect, meaning very good, comfortable, and appropriate; It

also refers to authentic and genuine. “巴适” is translated as “good stuff” in the movie, expressing the praise of Taiyi Zhenren for the fine wine, which also sounds very reasonable. However, at this point, this sentence should express the enjoyment state of Taiyi Zhenren after drinking delicious wine, which can be changed to “nice”. When expressing the feeling of enjoyment, one word is often more colloquial and comfortable than two words, which is also one of the points of communicative translation-simplicity, clarity, and directness.

Translation of limericks

The limerick is a kind of slang poetry style rich in fun. Although limerick poetry does not pay much attention to rhythm, nor does it pay attention to antithesis and tonality, it has absolute requirements for rhyme, and is usually composed of five-character or seven-character sentences. This type of poetry is generally easy to understand, witty and humorous, and sometimes implies sarcasm and humor. Translation of such language structures is extremely difficult, so it is important to concentrate on the purpose of communicative translation. On the basis that the original text’s primary purpose was to express concepts, the precise content can be adjusted and changed in the appropriate ways.

原文：我是小妖怪，逍遥又自在。
杀人不眨眼，吃人不放盐。
一口七八个，肚子要撑破。
茅房去拉屎，想起忘带纸。

译文：I am a demon, a roaming and free one.

I kill without blinking, and eat people without thinking.
I eat eight at a time, until my belly is as round as a lime.
I sit on the crapper, but I forget the toilet paper.

This limerick poem was spoken by Nezha while crossing his legs on the wall. As he was born, he stirred up Chentang Pass, causing havoc. People thought he was a monster, so they were afraid of him. Therefore, he had to be locked up at home. Limerick does not adhere to flat and oblique rhymes, but it must be rhymed. Therefore, the sentence patterns in the original text are all in the form of rhyme, which makes it easy to read. It can be seen that this feature is well preserved in the translation, and the original text is paraphrased on the basis of rhyme, which is in line with the characteristic of communicative translation theory that “when there is a contradiction between information content and effect, communicative translation emphasizes effect rather than content”. “不放盐” is translated into “without thinking”, which rhymes with the preceding “blinking”; “肚子要撑破” is translated as “until my belly is as round as a lime”, which skillfully uses a simile to compare the belly to lime. By retaining a similar structure, the foreign viewers are able to get the same feeling as the domestic viewers, feeling Nezha’s helplessness and self-deprecation about being trapped in his own home.

Translation of culture-loaded words

The phrase or idiom of a specific thing formed under a cultural system is referred to as a “culture-loaded word,” also known as a “culture-specific word,” and it is able to fully illustrate the historical process of the long-term development of a particular nation and its cultural activities that are unique from those of other nations. Such words only exist in one culture and do not exist in another, so they carry rich cultural connotations. It is precisely because of this particularity that it is quite difficult to translate such words.

Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child is a native Chinese animated film, which inevitably contains lots of culture-loaded words. For those relatively simple cultural-loaded words, translators can accurately convey the meaning of the target language without excessive interpretation, so semantic translation is generally used. It is worth noting that due to the cultural differences between the two languages, semantic translation should avoid causing cultural misunderstandings.

Example 1

原文：火尖枪

译文：fire-tipped spear

Example 2

原文：天劫咒

译文：heaven-made curse

Example 3

原文：魔丸

译文：Demon Pill

“Fire-tipped spear” is one of Nezha’s weapons, with a flame shaped head. The literal meaning of “fire-tipped spear” is a long spear with a tip like fire. Therefore, semantic translation will not lead to cultural misunderstandings, and it can also make foreign viewers feel the power of the fire-tipped spear.

The idea of “天庭” does not exist in Western society. Using the matching etymology of Western culture, “heaven,” is able to help better express the cultural information in the text so that foreign audiences can immediately get the cultural context of the movie through subtitles.

“Demon” in English has the meaning of “devil”, and the addition of “pill” can correctly reflect the close relationship between Nezha’s density and the word “demon”. This ensures that viewers can obtain the clearest information with minimal effort. Therefore, in the process of subtitle translation, different translation strategies should be adopted according to different kinds of texts and requirements to meet the different cultural needs of different audiences.

CONCLUSION

Taking the C-E translation of *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* subtitle text as data, this thesis conducted a study on subtitle translation in light of

Newmark's Translation Theory. After a detailed analysis of the text types and translation methods employed in C-E translation of *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* subtitle in the above chapters, this chapter comes to the conclusion.

Under the guidance of Newmark's communicative translation theory, this research examines the applicability of Newmark's communicative translation theory to the translation of film culture material, and demonstrates that communicative translation is effective for handling translation issues with complex and unique cultural characteristics that are not able to be directly understood by foreign audience. Meanwhile, from the perspective of translation purpose and text function, communicative translation is more conducive to achieving fluent communication between the source language and the target language, and is more likely to arouse emotional resonance among the target language receiver.

Guided by communicative translation theory, when more emphasis is placed on the target language reader or the target language expression habits, the translation mainly adopts the methods of amplification, omission, revision, and substitution. Thereby verifying the feasibility of communicative translation theory in guiding subtitle translation. Meanwhile, the author also finds that due to the tendency of movie texts to have communicative functions, communicative translation theory is more dominant in subtitle translation, while semantic translation is less.

Through the above analysis, it is clear that Newmark's communicative translation theory serves as a critical compass and has reference value in the translation process of C-E cultural information in movies. I hope that follow-up research can give more attention, attention, and support to this field.

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