



# A Study of Subtitle Translation from the Perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory Taking the Movie "La La Land" as an Example

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**Abstract.** With the continuous development of international society, the forms of cultural exchanges are gradually diversified. The movie is an important carrier of culture, so subtitle translation has become an important field of translation research, the quality of which directly affects the dissemination of works and audience acceptance. In order to make audiences from different cultural backgrounds understand the meaning of a movie, subtitle translation requires the translator to let the target language audience get the same artistic enjoyment as the source language audience, which coincides with Naida's theory of functional equivalence. Therefore, using this theory to guide movie subtitle translation can effectively improve the quality of translation. In order to better improve the target language audience's understanding of subtitles and to show the artistry, culture and science of subtitle translation, this paper, based on the basic framework of the functional equivalence theory and the characteristics of subtitle translation, takes the movie "*La La Land*" as an example. It explores how the functional equivalence theory can guide the subtitle translation from the three dimensions of vocabulary, style, and culture, to enable the target language audience to understand the content of the original text deeply and to help the translator to improve the translated contents from the audience's point of view, thus improving the quality of subtitle translation. Finally, it is concluded that using the theory of functional equivalence to guide movie subtitle translation and adopting flexible translation methods can improve the quality of subtitle translation so that people can enjoy movies.

**Keywords:** subtitle translation, translation strategy, functional equivalence theory, *La La Land*

## 1 Introduction

The movie is an important cultural carrier and bears the mission of cultural exchange. At present, although the discipline of translation is developing vigorously, in general, people pay less attention to movie subtitle translation than to the translation of novels, poems or scientific and technological genres. However, with the continuous introduction of foreign movies, subtitle translation has become an indispensable work, and its

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translation quality directly affects the communication effect of the movie and the moviegoers' experience.

Translation of movie and television subtitles is limited by time and space, and its translation is difficult and needs relevant theories to guide. Naida's functional equivalence theory emphasizes that when translating, one should not strive for the rigid correspondence of the surface meaning of the text, but to reach the functional equivalence between the two languages, so as to make the audience understand the contents better, which is applicable to film and television subtitle translation. Besides, the body of relevant research on song and dance movies is small, and there is no research in this field that currently analyzes subtitle translation of films by using functional equivalence theory.

The movie *La La Land* in which Emma Stone and Ryan Gosling star, is a romantic cabaret and a masterpiece of cabaret movie released by Lionsgate Pictures and directed by Damien Chazelle. The film, which tells the love story between a jazz pianist and an actress, was released in the United States on December 16, 2016, and won seven awards at the 74th Golden Globe Awards, including Best Picture (Comedy), Best Director, Best Actor, Best Actress, and "Best Cinematography" at the 89th Academy Awards, "Best Art Direction", "Best Score" and six other awards at the 89th Academy Awards. The dialogues and songs in the text of the film are rich and the subtitle translation has great research value, which is worthy of in-depth discussion. Taking the subtitle translation of the movie "*La La Land*" as an example, this paper analyzes the characteristics of subtitle translation and the practical application of functional equivalence theory in film and television subtitle translation, with a view to providing a reference for film and television subtitle translation.

## 2 Introduction to the Theory of Functional Equivalence in Translation

As a core concept in modern translation, functional equivalence theory sprouted in the 18th century, George Campbell put forward the translation theory of the correlation between the meaning of words and the purpose of using words, and its main ideas laid the foundation for the development of functional equivalence theory. After that, many scholars did further research on it and clarified the concept of functional equivalence theory. The linguists of the former Soviet Union, such as Fedorov, put forward the theory of equivalent translation. The one who has made the most profound research and contribution to the theory of functional equivalence is Eugene Naida, an American translation scholar<sup>[1]</sup>. In 1969, American linguist Eugene A. Naida put forward the theory of functional equivalence, that is, when translating, we do not seek a rigid correspondence between the surface meaning of the words but use the most appropriate, natural and reciprocal language to reproduce the information of the source language from the semantic to the stylistic level<sup>[2]</sup>. The basic idea is: to compare the way of understanding and appreciation of the recipients of the source text with the recipients of the translated text so that the response of the recipients of the translated text to the translated text should be basically equivalent to the response of the recipients of the

source text. According to Naida, different principles of reciprocity need to be established according to the different types of translation. Functional equivalence aims at complete naturalness of expression and tries to relate the reader to the way he behaves in his own cultural context.

In 1993, Naida, in his book *Linguistic Culture and Translation*, categorized translation equivalence into "the highest level of equivalence" and "the lowest level of equivalence". "The highest level of equivalence" means that "the response of the target language listeners or readers is basically the same as that of the original listeners or readers in understanding and appreciating the original text"; "the lowest level of equivalence" means "the translation achieves sufficient equivalence to enable the target language listener or reader to understand and appreciate the original text as the original language listener or reader" [3]. Naida's theory focuses on content rather than form with the pursuit of helping the target language readers have the same feeling as the source language readers. The purpose of movie subtitle translation work is to let the target language audience get the same understanding and experience as the source language audience, aimed at helping different nationalities of the audience have the same film resonance, which is the same as the goal pursued by the theory of functional equivalence, so the theory of functional equivalence is of great significance to movie subtitling translation.

To summarize, in the process of translation, translators should take the purpose of readers and viewers as the starting point. Otherwise, subtitle translation will be meaningless. The application of functional equivalence theory to subtitle translation is very common, and almost all the movie and television works that people see in their daily life involve the application of this theory [4].

### **3 Principles of Functional Equivalence Theory in Subtitle Translation**

#### **3.1 Vocabulary**

According to the theory of functional equivalence, translators do not have to translate word by word and sentence by sentence when dealing with subtitle translation but should find words with corresponding functions in the target language for equivalent replacement so as to make the audience in the target language understand the meaning of the movie dialogues more easily. However, for some words with special meanings that carry the significance of the country's cultural background, sometimes the method of direct translation should be adopted, but sometimes, in order to make the public understand the meaning, alternative words should be found, and suitable translation methods should be chosen, such as the method of deletion, the method of augmentation, and the method of innovation.

Due to cultural differences, the original subtitles contain many words with rich cultural connotations or some conventional colloquial words, which may be obvious to native English speakers or people living in the UK and the US, but if the translation does not explain and supplement them, they will confuse the moviegoers and affect their movie-going experience [5].

Example 1: You need some medication?

你是否需要速效救心丸? (Do you need quick-acting heart rescue pills? )<sup>[6]</sup>

In Example 1, the word "速效救心丸" (quick-acting rescue pill) is the name of a kind of Chinese medicine that can activate blood circulation, remove blood stasis and relieve pain, increase coronary blood flow and relieve angina pectoris. It is used to treat coronary heart disease with qi stagnation and, blood stasis, angina pectoris. It is often used in colloquial speech to refer to a panacea that calms the mind in times of extreme tension and anxiety. Medication is translated as "速效救心丸" to fit the semantic context, but if it is simply translated as "medication", the viewer will feel confused. If it is only translated as "medicine", then the moviegoer will be confused and will not be able to show the heroine's extreme nervousness and uneasiness.

### 3.2 Stylistic Aspects

Subtitles, as a major channel of cultural transmission, carry different language habits and cultural backgrounds of different countries. When translating subtitles, the style of the original work should be preserved as much as possible. Therefore, it is inevitable that translators will settle for the second best when translating, utilizing augmentation, abridgment and re-creation to partially shape the style of the target language<sup>[7]</sup>.

### 3.3 Cultural Aspects

The functional equivalence translation theory proposed by Naida is extremely advantageous in cultural translation. Because, in layman's terms, the core of the theory of functional equivalence is: exhausting all means to output all the information contained in one language into the equivalent linguistic information that can be accepted by readers of the target language<sup>[8]</sup>. As more and more international movies with local culture are being imported into China, Chinese viewers have mixed feelings. Not all moviegoers are able to read and understand the source language information without subtitles, and even foreign language learners may not be able to fully understand the plot of a movie, not to mention movies mixed with foreign cultures. Therefore, the subtitle translators are obliged to give special treatment to the information in the movie that carries a lot of foreign cultures and to make the audience understand such information.

Example 2: The Baked Potato just threw it away.

不知道哪个没眼光的把它扔了。(I don't know who with poor taste threw it away.)

In this movie, the hero often collects the personal belongings of his favorite musicians, including a small bench. When a friend inadvertently steps on this famous, personally used bench at the hero's house, the hero gets very angry and reveals the origin of the bench. As for Example 2, the word "potato" is often used in English as a metaphor for people. For example, couch potato refers to a person who spends all day on the couch, eating snacks and watching TV and is too lazy to get up and do anything else; Internet potato refers to a person who browses the Internet every day; small potato refers to an unknown person while big potato refers to an important and famous person. "baked" means being baked in an oven, so in the slang "Baked Potato" refers to a locked

up and blindfolded potato, i.e., a person who has no vision. It is difficult to explain "Baked Potato" to the viewer without a different translation in the few seconds during the time when the subtitles remain.

The primary goal of both functional equivalence theory and subtitle translation is to improve the acceptance of the audience in the translated language. In subtitle translation, overly faithful translation to the source language will make the meaning obscure and difficult to understand, which will directly affect the movie-watching experience. Therefore, from the perspective of functional equivalence, subtitle translation should be based on the local culture and integrate the characteristics of other cultures so that the audience can understand the plot in the shortest possible time.

## **4 Notes on Subtitle Translation and the Application of Functional Equivalence Theory in Subtitle Translation**

### **4.1 Dual Time and Space Constraints**

The biggest influential factor in the process of subtitle translation is the limitation of time and space. As for time, subtitle processing needs to be synchronized with the image and sound on the screen, so the subtitle of each screen can only appear for a few seconds or dozens of seconds; as for space, the subtitle occupies a very small space at the bottom of the screen, generally speaking, a line of subtitle contains 33-40 letters or 20 Chinese characters. Some scholars suggest that a line of English and a line of Chinese subtitles be displayed at the same time, and if the number of subtitle lines is too large, it will take up too much room on the screen and affect the audience's understanding of the subtitle. If the contents of the subtitle are too long and complicated, which does not comply with the principle of temporal and spatial limitations, then it is a failed subtitle, thus losing the significance of the subtitle itself<sup>[9]</sup>.

Example 3: Oh, you know what? I think we're good.

我觉得差不多了。(I think it's almost done.)

The heroine dreams of being an actress and attends auditions only to get rejected. This dialogue in Example 3 occurs when the heroine is struggling to perform, only to be brutally interrupted by the casting agent who informs her that the audition is over and that there are many more people waiting in line behind her. As a result, the speaker speaks in a fast and rushed tone. When translating, firstly, the intonation word oh is omitted, and secondly, the phrase "you know what?" is a verbal idiom of native English speakers, which has no substantive meaning. If it is translated, on the one hand, the readers of the translated text may not know what it means, which may cause confusion; on the other hand, it will also cause the burden of time and space; therefore, it is omitted by the translator.

### **4.2 Colloquialization of Lines**

The colloquialization of subtitle translation means to realize the transformation of the spoken language of the source language to the spoken language of the target language.

Generally speaking, in order to help the audience understand the plot in a short time, the film will not use obscure words but use mainly spoken words without using formal language. Then it should be transformed into the corresponding spoken language in the translation, avoiding too much written and specialized language so as to help the audience easily understand the lines <sup>[10]</sup>.

### 4.3 Emotionalization of Characters

Subtitle translation should focus on the emotional characteristics of the characters. The words of different characters in film and television dramas have unique stylistic characteristics, and the language of different classes is also very different. When translating, it is necessary to retain their linguistic characteristics and pay attention to the consistency of form and rhetoric in order to emphasize the character image and express the vividness and reality of the characters. Meanwhile, in some movies and TV dramas, the characters' words are often closely related to their national cultural background, but it is difficult to find the corresponding cultural words in the target language. In order to better promote the development of the plot, help the audience understand the cultural connotations of the characters' words and further shape the characters' image and enrich the contents of the movie and TV, it is very necessary to annotate the relevant backgrounds in the subtitle translation, which is also a way of functional equivalence <sup>[11]</sup>.

### 4.4 Use of idioms

Popularization of subtitle translation refers to the use of idioms in the translated language, which is essentially a kind of naturalization principle. There are rich idioms in different national cultures, and these idioms have great similarities, although the expressions are different but what it conveys is almost the same. When translating, it is necessary to pay more attention to the relevant idioms and the spiritual connotation than the limitation of the form and translate the idioms in the source language into national idioms with similar principles. Appropriate use of idioms and colloquialisms can also save subtitle space and allow viewers to understand the contents of the movie and television accurately in the short subtitles. <sup>[12]</sup>

Example 4: Someone in the crowd could be the one you need to know

也许人群中的某个人就会成为伯乐(Perhaps someone in the crowd will become a Bo Le (a person with an eye for talent.)

The one to finally lift you off the ground

让你于众人中脱颖而出(Allow yourself to stand out among the crowd)

In Example 4, the word "伯乐" (Bo Le in pinyin) is an ancient Chinese historical figure, rumored to be a man in the Spring and Autumn period, known for his good horse reading. Now it means a person who is good at discovering, recommending, cultivating and utilizing talents. In this dialog, the heroine's best friend encourages the heroine to go to a party and says that maybe at the party, the heroine can meet "the one you need to know and the one to finally lift you off the ground."

If translated literally as "the person you need to know, the one who will help you up", it is not only long and wordy but also unclear, failing to convey the significance of

this "person" to the heroine. However, if it is translated as "伯乐", a familiar historical figure to Chinese people, the audience can quickly understand its meaning.

#### 4.5 Abbreviations and deletions

The limitations of screen space and resident time require that subtitles be reduced. Typically, the faster the speed of speech, the more information is compressed. Subtitle translators need to "judge the cognitive power of the information receiver, depending on the judgment of the cognitive activity of the information receiver in the limited time and space. So some unnecessary and unimportant information can be cut down or abridged in order to highlight the more relevant information". According to the principle of optimal relevance, it is necessary to reduce the information and keep the main content; otherwise, the long subtitle contents will increase the burden of the viewers and affect the viewing effect, thus affecting the communication effect. Most of the deleted contents are tone words, semantic repetitions and components that do not match with the viewers' cognition. Due to the synchronization of sound and screen in movies, the deleted information will be supplemented accordingly.

Example 5: Cappuccino, please. Right. Of course.

一杯卡布奇诺, 谢谢。好的。(One cappuccino, thank you. Okay)

Example 5 is a conversation in which the heroine meets a famous actress in the cafe where she works. The actress orders a cup of coffee from the heroine, and what she says is short, and she says in a hurried tone. The time during which the subtitle appears is very short. The words "right" and "of course" are semantic repetitions, so they can be deleted.

Example 6: Holy shit! You want to open a window?

妈呀! 你要开窗吗? (OMG! Do you want to open the window?)

As mentioned earlier, due to cultural differences, translations sometimes need to abbreviate and abridge the original text in order to make the movie more fluent to the audience. Similarly, a different translation can also serve this purpose well. In Example 6, "Holy" is a religious word, meaning saintly or religious. Since most Westerners believe in Christianity, there are many words combined with holy in their spoken language, such as "holy shit", "holy hell", and "holy cats". The actual meaning of these words is "oh my god" and other exclamations. Thus, it is translated directly as "妈呀" which is appropriate so that the audience can feel the sense of surprise.

## 5 Conclusion

Movie subtitle translation is constrained by such factors as cultural differences, time and space, so it is not easy to convey the original movie information to the target language audience. Successful subtitle translation requires that the translator be able to convey the information of the source text without distortion or redundancy and, at the same time, choose the appropriate language that meets the expression habits of the target language to achieve the goal of functional equivalence. In order to accurately convey meaning and achieve functional equivalence, it is possible to go beyond the form

of the text. In the process of translation, the theory of functional equivalence has an important guiding significance because its center is the acceptance of the target language audience. Under the guidance of this theory, subtitle translation can better serve the public and promote the dissemination of film and television communication and exchange. At the same time, among various translation strategies and theories, subtitle translation guided by functional equivalence can make the translation more standardized, give the translation a theoretical standard for reference, and promote the quality of subtitle translation from the aspects of culture, contents and form. This paper studies and analyzes the subtitle translation of "La La Land" from the theory of functional equivalence, which provides academic value research and practical guidance for the translation of movie subtitles. This paper still has certain limitations and only selects individual cases for analysis, which is a new attempt to study the subtitle translation of song and dance movies. It is believed that under the guidance of functional equivalence theory, subtitle translation will make new progress in the future.

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