

Original Paper

A Study on Subtitle Translation of the Film *The Secret Life of Pets* from the Perspective of Newmark's Communicative Translation and Semantic Translation Theories

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Abstract

*This paper examines the subtitle translation of the animated film *The Secret Life of Pets* from the perspective of Peter Newmark's theories of communicative translation and semantic translation. The study reveals that the subtitle translation of this film embodies a combination of both principles. Most translations employ liberal translation through the conversion of cultural concepts, the use of Chinese idioms or idiomatic expressions, and contextual adaptation, reflecting the reader-centered equivalence principle of communicative translation. Some translations retain the original text structure, surface meaning, or cultural imagery through literal translation, demonstrating the text fidelity and author-centered principle of semantic translation. This research vividly illustrates the coexistence and complementarity of these two translation theories in practice.*

Keywords

*communicative translation theory, semantic translation theory, film subtitle translation, *The Secret Life of Pets**

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization, films play a vital role in cross-cultural communication, and subtitle translation significantly influences how audiences across languages receive and understand film content. *The Secret Life of Pets*, an animated comedy featuring vivid animal characters and rich cultural expressions, presents notable challenges in subtitle translation, particularly in conveying humor, character traits, and cultural references.

This study employs Newmark's communicative and semantic translation theories to analyze the subtitle translation strategies used in the film, exploring how translators balance between target-audience

comprehension and source-text fidelity through selected dialogue examples.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Review of Newmark's theories

Reiss's (2014) text typology theory categorizes texts into three types: informative, expressive, and operative. As Zhu (2004) notes, the significance of Reiss's text typology theory for translation lies in the idea that "determining the text type determines the translation method. Translators can prioritize content or form based on the text type. The primary goal in translating informative texts is to ensure the accuracy of information, expressive texts focus on corresponding aesthetic effects of rhetorical structures, and operative texts aim to achieve the purpose of the original." Reiss's text typology theory provides broad guiding principles for translation strategies. Building on this, Newmark proposed the more operational theories of communicative and semantic translation, which can be seen as a specific application and extension of Reiss's text typology theory.

Newmark (1981) proposes that communicative translation is a translation method or approach that views translation as "a communicative process occurring in a social context." Newmark argues that "the goal of communicative translation is to reproduce in the target language the same effect that the original text had on its readers." Lin (1987) accurately elaborates on the focus of communicative translation: "The translator must first strive to make the translation concise and clear to highlight the message; secondly, they must understand the general knowledge level, intelligence, and sensibility of the target readers; and thirdly, they must avoid 'chewing the food for the reader.' The most critical issue is the immediacy of communicative translation—the success or failure of the translation depends on the reader's response."

Newmark (1981) explains semantic translation as follows: "The translator attempts, within the syntactic and semantic constraints of the target language, to reproduce the precise contextual meaning of the original author." Newmark emphasizes that semantic translation should translate the semantic and syntactic structures of the source language as closely as possible, as well as the precise contextual meaning of the original. In other words, semantic translation remains faithful to the original work, is author-centered, and prioritizes consistency in structure and syntax.

Regarding the differences between communicative and semantic translation, Lin (1987) believes that "the fundamental distinction between communicative and semantic translation lies in the fact that communicative translation emphasizes the effect produced by the message, while semantic translation emphasizes the content of the message." Munday's (2022) comparative summary of the evaluation criteria for communicative and semantic translation theories also reflects this distinction: "For communicative translation, the evaluation is based on whether the communicative message of the original has been accurately conveyed in the target language. For semantic translation, the evaluation is based on whether the meaning and intent of the original have been accurately reproduced."

Lin (1987) also suggests that the difference between communicative and semantic translation lies

primarily in the form of expression. Semantic translation brings the translation closer to the form of the original, preserving as much as possible the sentence length and wording of the source text. In contrast, communicative translation often reorganizes syntax and sentence structure, altering wording and collocations to align with the linguistic habits and cultural context of the target language.

Due to the differences between communicative and semantic translation, the two theories are applicable to different types of texts. In her research, Yang (2008) summarizes the translation theories generally chosen for three different text types: Both “informative texts” and “operative texts” (also called “vocative texts”) prioritize accurate, concise, and easily understandable information transmission, and thus achieve their “reader-centered” goals through communicative translation. “Expressive texts,” on the other hand, are author-centered and typically employ semantic translation to adhere more closely to the original author’s style.

2.2 Review of Film Subtitle Translation

Wu (2013) points out that film subtitle translation is characterized by its popular nature, immediacy, spatiotemporal constraints, cross-cultural communication, and colloquialism. The popular nature emphasizes that film dialogue should align with the cultural level of the majority of the audience and be easy to understand, which is why film dialogue translation also features colloquial and popular language. Immediacy refers to the fact that, unlike ordinary reading texts, film subtitles appear and disappear with the characters’ speech or scene changes; they are transient and cannot be repeatedly reviewed or pondered. Spatiotemporal constraints indicate that the timing of subtitle display matches the start and end of the characters’ speech, and the spatial placement of subtitles is limited to the bottom of the screen. Furthermore, as film itself is an important medium for cultural exchange, film subtitle translation also involves cultural interaction and integration, embodying the characteristics of cross-cultural communication.

Regarding translation strategies, Wu (2013) emphasizes that clarity and ease of comprehension are paramount; subtitles must allow the audience to grasp information accurately and effortlessly. Given the spatiotemporal limitations, the reduction strategy is frequently employed, where redundant information is omitted to highlight the core content. Zhao (2005) adds that cultural conversion is another common strategy in subtitle translation. Since films are rich in cultural connotations and the audience may not share the creators’ cultural background, methods such as the transformation of cultural images, the adaptation of puns and wordplay, and the conversion of proverbs and idioms are often used in subtitle translation to ensure the audience accurately comprehends the deeper meaning.

2.3 Review of research on subtitle translation of The Secret Life of Pets

To date, direct academic research focusing specifically on the subtitle translation of *The Secret Life of Pets* is scarce. Available literature indicates that Xu (2018) has conducted a study from the perspective of Nida’s “Functional Equivalence” theory, examining translation strategies (such as free translation, amplification, reduction, and domestication) used in the film’s subtitles. The core of her research lies in how to elicit a response from the target audience similar to that of the source audience. This work

provides a preliminary theoretical foundation for the present study and confirms the applicability of audience-response-centered translation theories in audiovisual translation.

However, Xu's research is primarily anchored in the dimension of "communicative effect." Functional Equivalence theory emphasizes the communicative function of translation and reader response, offering relatively less systematic exploration of the important dimension concerning the transmission of source-text form, authorial intent, and foreign cultural elements. In other words, Xu's study addresses "how to make the audience understand and react similarly" but does not thoroughly examine how to balance "making the audience understand" with "preserving the original's distinctive features."

This gap presents an opportunity for the current study to contribute. Adopting the dual perspective of Newmark's communicative and semantic translation theories, this paper aims to move beyond a singular "equivalence" focus. Through a comparative analysis of specific dialogue translation examples from the film, it investigates how the translator negotiates and chooses between adhering to source-text cultural connotations (semantic translation) and accommodating target-audience comprehension (communicative translation), thereby supplementing existing research.

3. Case Analysis

The Chinese and English subtitles analyzed in this study are sourced from the Tencent Video platform, which boasts a wide audience and high acceptance within China. This section selects several classic lines from the film and analyzes the methods and effectiveness of their subtitle translation from the perspectives of communicative translation theory and semantic translation theory.

3.1 Case Analysis of Dialogue Translation Reflecting Communicative Translation Theory

3.1.1 Conversion of Cultural Concepts

When the source text contains culture-specific terms, literal translation often hinders comprehension for the target audience. Therefore, the translator performs a conversion of cultural concepts, rendering culture-specific terms from the source text into expressions with equivalent meaning within the target culture.

Example 1

Source text: Look, if you really wanna get your turf back, you're gonna have to start acting like an alpha dog.

Target text: 如果你想要夺回你的窝，就得表现出老大的气势。

This is the advice given by Chloe to Max on how to reclaim his spot from Duke. The term "alpha," originating from animal behavior studies, is a culture-specific term in the West that has evolved beyond its scientific roots to become a symbol of power, gender, and social hierarchy. This translation opts not to literally render it as "阿尔法狗" but instead uses "老大," a term from Chinese vernacular contexts meaning "leader" or "boss," freely translating the line as "表现出老大的气势" (act with the authority of a boss).

This example demonstrates that converting culture-specific terms in the source text into expressions

compatible with the target culture helps eliminate cultural barriers and facilitates audience understanding, embodying the principles of Communicative Translation.

3.1.2 Use of Chinese Idioms, Set Phrases, and Colloquial Expressions

When English dialogue conveys specific emotions, states, or relationships, the translator often employs highly concise, culturally rich, and easily understandable Chinese idioms or colloquial phrases as substitutes.

Example 2

Source text: It's one of those relationships where you just know.

Target text: 我们之间的关系真是心照不宣。

When the dog Max describes his relationship with his owner Katie, the translator uses the four-character idiom “心照不宣,” which implies mutual understanding without words. This allows the Chinese audience to instantly grasp the intimate, seamless bond between the person and the dog conveyed by the original English clause.

Example 3

Source text: So, that how it's gonna be.

Target text: 看来要撕破脸了是吗

Duke is a newly adopted dog. His arrival displeases Max, who fears Duke will affect his relationship with Katie. Max complains to Katie, trying to get rid of Duke. When Duke overhears Max speaking ill of him to Katie, he says this line to Max. The translator uses the Chinese colloquialism “撕破脸,” a metaphor for the breakdown of a relationship. This makes it easy for the Chinese audience to understand while also conveying the escalating conflict between the two dogs.

Furthermore, in specific contexts, using Chinese idioms or colloquialisms can often convey content and emotion more directly than literal translation.

Example 4

Source text: Ricky, rest in peace.

Target text: 里奇，你含笑九泉了。

This translation aligns with Chinese linguistic conventions by replacing the simple Western eulogy “rest in peace” with the Chinese idiom “含笑九泉” (literally: to smile in the nine springs—to die happily/contentedly), adding a layer of humor. The story context here is that stray animals, having been abused by humans, hate both humans and domesticated pets. Max and Duke, to save themselves, pretend to be stray animals and lie about having brutally killed their owner. The rabbit Snowball believes their lie, remarks that their cruel style resembles that of the deceased duck Ricky from the Flushed Pets gang. A literal translation like “可以安息了” (may you rest in peace) would not achieve this humorous effect.

Example 5

Source text: We burn it up to the ground.

Target text: 烧得渣都不剩。

“Burn to the ground” literally means to burn something completely. Using this colloquial Chinese expression allows the Chinese audience to similarly appreciate the exaggerated tone.

Example 6

Source text: Break away move

Target text: 金兔脱壳

Here, the rabbit says this while resisting his new owner’s embrace. The translator not only uses an idiom for the liberal translation but also adapts it by changing “蝉” (cicada) from the original idiom “金蝉脱壳” (to escape like a cicada shedding its skin—a crafty escape) to “兔” (rabbit) to match the speaker, enhancing the humorous effect.

3.1.3 Adaptation to Context and Character

The meaning of film dialogue is highly dependent on the immediate context and the identity of the speaker. Translators often make adjustments based on these factors.

Example 7

Source text: That maybe the sausage talking.

Target text: 我可能是香肠吃多了，在说胡话。

A literal translation like “香肠谈话” (sausage talking) would confuse the Chinese audience. The adjustment considers the context: during their “escape,” Duke and Max sneak into a sausage factory. After eating his fill of sausages, Duke even finds Max more agreeable and says this line to him.

Example 8

Source text: Pellets, Well, see you guys later.

Target text: 真衰，待会见。

The hamster Norman is always scurrying through the air ducts trying to get home but keeps ending up in the wrong place. “Pellets” literally refers to dry pet food pellets. A literal translation would stick to the surface meaning, not only puzzling the Chinese audience but also failing to convey the hamster’s emotion. Using the Chinese slang expression “真衰” (what lousy luck) for the liberal translation fits the context of Norman’s frustration at repeatedly failing to find home and conveys a sense of humor consistent with the film’s comedic tone.

Example 9

Source text: You got the stench of domestication all over you.

Target text: 你们闻上去一股家养的臭味。

This is what Snowball, the rabbit, says upon first meeting Max and Duke. This line immediately establishes the conflict between stray animals and domestic pets. Here, “domestication” is not literally translated as “驯养” but rather as “家养” (domesticated/home-raised), aligning with the film’s theme of “pets vs. stray animals.”

Example 10

Source text: We are the Flushed Pets.

Target text: 我们是堕落宠帮。

This case is similar to Example 9. This is also Snowball's self-introduction during the stray animals' first appearance. "Flushed" here means expelled or discarded. A literal translation might seem somewhat flat. "堕落宠帮" (The Fallen Pets Gang) not only resonates with the film's content but also suits the speaker Snowball's identity as a gang leader.

3.1.4 Application of Various Translation Techniques

To facilitate understanding for the Chinese audience and accurately convey meaning, the translator also employs many specific translation techniques, which also fully reflect communicative translation principles.

Example 11

Source text: You are an old blanket kind of dog.

Target text: 你这样的狗就该配旧毯子。

On Duke's first night in Max's home, feeling threatened, Max says this to provoke Duke. Instead of literally translating it as "你是一种旧毯子类型的狗," the translator adjusts the word order. This better conforms to Chinese expression habits and conveys Max's contempt for Duke.

Example 12

Source text: And he's scary. And he's frightening. And he's the death of all good things.

Target text: 他好吓人，凶神恶煞，是摧毁一切美好事物的瘟神。

When Duke first arrives, Max, displeased, says this to his owner Katie. The translator employs conversion (changing "death" from a noun to a verb "摧毁" - to destroy) and amplification (adding the culturally resonant term "瘟神" - bringer of pestilence/curse). This aligns with the dynamic nature of Chinese language and fully expresses Max's dislike for Duke.

Example 13

Source text: This is dark and forbidden crap.

Target text: 在这个暗无天日的鬼地方。

Here, the translator makes a necessary omission regarding "forbidden." A literal translation like "黑暗的禁忌的" (dark and forbidden) would seem redundant, whereas "暗无天日" (pitch-dark; complete darkness, no sight of sky or sun) is more concise and clear.

3.2 Case Analysis of Dialogue Translation Reflecting Semantic Translation Theory

3.2.1 Retention of Formal and Structural Features

When specific syntax, structure, lexical choices, or rhetoric in the source text possess distinctive style or carry core meaning, the translator may sacrifice some fluency and opt for literal translation to preserve these features.

Example 1

Source text: Brown and white, he is a short hair.

Target text: 棕白色皮毛，是短毛。

Here, to reflect character traits, the translator follows the sentence structure and word order of the

original. A translation like “他有棕白色的短毛” (He has brown-and-white short hair), while seemingly concise, would render it a plain declarative sentence. In contrast, the translation that adheres to the original structure and word order, though seemingly somewhat repetitive and verbose, corresponds to the scene where the dog Gadget blinks while mentally noting Max’s characteristics, conveying her adorably clumsy thought process.

Example 2

Source text: He is too stupid to talk and too ugly to eat.

Target text: 笨到难以沟通，丑到难以下咽。

This translation strictly replicates the parallel “too...to...” structure of the original. This literal approach precisely conveys the exaggerated, sarcastic tone of the source sentence.

When the lexical form itself is peculiar and produces a specific effect, the translator sometimes chooses to retain this structure:

Example 3

Source text: It’s poo-poo with a dash of caca.

Target text: 是糞糞混着便便的味道。

“Poo-poo” and “caca” are Western childish terms, two different words with the same meaning. Here, the translator does not use reduction to translate it as “混合着糞便的味道” (a smell mixed with feces). Instead, by following the formal characteristics of the source vocabulary and using Chinese reduplicative words, the translation conveys the verbal humor expressed in the original.

Example 4

Source text: Domesticated never!

Target text: 永不驯服！

In most cases throughout the film, liberal translation is used to fit the context and facilitate understanding—for example, as mentioned earlier, “domestication” was liberally translated as “家养” (home-raised). However, the same word is translated literally in this instance. Furthermore, no subject is added here, preserving the original sentence’s subject-less structure. This literal translation precisely suits the resolute, slogan-like emotion conveyed by the rabbit when shouting this declaration.

3.2.2 Retention of Acceptable Foreign Cultural Elements

Although cultural imagery in the text is often adapted through liberal translation for the ease of the target audience’s understanding, there are also instances of intentional literal translation.

Example 5

Source text: I’ll cut you this way and you look like waffle.

Target text: 我可是会把你抓成华夫饼。

As the Western food “waffle” is already familiar to Chinese audiences, and its grid-like characteristic as a metaphor for scratches is clear within the plot context, the translator here does not liberally translate it as “把你抓成大花脸” (scratch your face into a mess). Instead, the cultural imagery of the foreign food is retained. This represents an implantation and dissemination of a foreign cultural

element, also reflecting the principles of semantic translation.

4. Conclusion

This study illustrates that the subtitle translation of *The Secret Life of Pets* integrates both communicative and semantic translation approaches. Communicative strategies, such as cultural adaptation, idiomatic substitution, and contextual tailoring, enhance immediacy and comprehension for Chinese viewers. Semantic strategies, including literal translation and retention of source-text structures, preserve stylistic features and culturally transparent elements where appropriate.

However, this research has certain limitations. The analysis is based on a limited set of examples from one film, which may not fully represent translation practices across different genres or cultural contexts. Additionally, the study focuses mainly on linguistic and cultural aspects, while practical constraints such as timing, space on screen, and synchronization with audiovisual elements are not thoroughly examined.

In summary, the findings demonstrate that effective subtitle translation requires a flexible combination of communicative and semantic methods, rather than strict adherence to a single approach. This research reinforces the applicability of Newmark's theoretical framework in audiovisual translation analysis and suggests the need for broader, more context-sensitive studies in the future.

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