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Original Paper

Rendering the Bodily Actions Encoded in *Ketou* in Microdrama Subtitles: A Case Study of *A Mother's Wait: Mom, Dad, I'm Back*

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Abstract

When physical gestures carry heavy cultural baggage, translating them word for word rarely works. Subtitlers almost always have to pick and choose which parts of the movement to keep on screen. In this paper, we look at how the Chinese ritual of "ketou" (磕头) is handled in the English subtitles of the exported Microdrama A Mother's Wait: Mom, Dad, I'm Back. Standard Chinese dictionaries break ketou down into a clean, three-part sequence: dropping to the knees, placing both hands on the floor, and bringing the head down near or against the ground. Yet across the four scenes where the gesture appears, the English subtitles never spell out all three steps. Instead, the translations split along pragmatic lines. When characters mention ketou simply to beg for mercy or apologize, the subtitles skip the physical action entirely and stick to the emotion. But when a wager or punishment requires actual physical compliance, the translation brings in the verb kneel. In one scene where the dialogue pairs kneeling and kowtowing together, the subtitle compresses both into kneel and apologize, dropping the lower-body and head movements completely. Looking at these choices through Ronald Langacker's notions of prominence and granularity helps explain what is going on: subtitlers are not making random omissions, but adjusting physical detail to fit what the dialogue needs to accomplish dramatically.

Keywords

Cognitive Construal, Microdrama Subtitles, Bodily Action Information, Ketou

1. Introduction

China's 15th Five-Year Plan identifies short videos and Microdramas as emerging forms of cultural production within its discussion of the cultural industry. Separately, the Plan addresses the expansion of

international communication networks and the international development of cultural enterprises [1].These policy priorities provide a broader context for examining the overseas circulation and subtitling of Chinese Microdramas. But translating these fast-paced shows comes with obvious headaches. Beyond the sheer speed of dialogue, subtitlers routinely run into culturally freighted physical gestures that do not translate easily into everyday English [2][3].

Screen translation has always been an exercise in triage. Space is tight, lines vanish in seconds, and viewers can only read so fast [4][5]. As Henrik Gottlieb pointed out decades ago, subtitling is fundamentally diagonal: it translates across languages while simultaneously shifting spoken dialogue into written text, all while locked to an existing audio-visual track [6]. Culture-bound expressions inevitably get pared down [7].

Take ketou (磕头) as a case in point. The gesture involves a sequence of physical actions and culturally specific meanings that may include deference, submission, or the recognition of hierarchical relations, depending on the social context. The *Contemporary Chinese Dictionary* defines it as "kneel on the floor, put both hands down, and lower your head to or near the ground" [8]. This definition describes an ordered sequence of physical actions rather than a single, static posture. Previous research has examined the translation of Chinese motion verbs and the representation of manner-related information in English [9]. However, less attention has been paid to how the individual components of a culturally specific, multi-stage bodily ritual are retained, modified, or omitted in subtitle translation.

Ronald Langacker's cognitive grammar, specifically his notions of prominence and granularity, gives us a straightforward way to track these shifts [10]. In this paper, we compare the Chinese dialogue of *A Mother's Wait: Mom, Dad, I'm Back* on the Hongguo platform [11] against its official English subtitles on ReelShort [12]. Across the entire 84-episode run, ketou shows up four times. We ask two simple questions: which parts of the physical movement actually make it into the English text, and how does the immediate dramatic context dictate what gets kept and what gets cut?

2. Theoretical Perspective and Analytical Baseline

Langacker argues that grammar is conceptual: how we phrase something reflects how we choose to view the scene. Two of his concepts are especially useful here. Prominence is about what gets put front and center. Granularity is about how much detail you provide.

2.1 Cognitive Construal: Prominence and Granularity

For the purposes of this study, prominence is operationalized in terms of whether a component of the dictionary-based action sequence receives an explicit lexical expression in the English subtitle. A component without a corresponding lexical expression is coded as "not explicitly represented in the subtitle text." Granularity is operationalized as the level of action detail expressed, ranging from a fuller representation of the component sequence to a broader, schematic term such as "kneel." These criteria are analytical definitions adopted for the present study; they should not be understood as direct equivalents of Langacker's theoretical definitions. It is worth noting that just because a movement is

missing from the subtitle script does not mean the viewer misses it; the actor on screen may be doing the action in plain sight.

2.2 Deconstructing the Bodily Actions of "Ketou"

Bodily action verbs are not abstract tokens; they are grounded in concrete motor experiences and somatic execution [13][14]. Building on the Contemporary Chinese Dictionary (7th ed.), ketou comprises three distinct kinematic phases: (1) kneeling down on the knees, (2) placing both hands on the ground for support, and (3) lowering the head near or touching the ground. These three components serve as our objective benchmark to assess how English subtitles handle the action—whether they preserve the full sequence, schematize it into a generic posture, or omit it altogether.

3. Data and Methodology

3.1 Corpus Profile and Sample Characteristics

The empirical data comes from the historical costume Microdrama *A Mother's Wait: Mom, Dad, I'm Back*, released on the overseas short-drama platform ReelShort. Spanning 84 episodes, the series features intense dramatic conflicts, including official oppression, familial pleas, public wagers, and formal confessions, offering a rich testing ground for culturally bound physical actions in translation.

To gather all relevant tokens, we conducted a full-text search for "磕头" (ketou) across the 84 episodes by aligning the Chinese dialogue on the Hongguo platform with the English subtitles on ReelShort. The term appears four times across the series: in Episodes 11, 60, 75, and 84. In Episode 84, "跪下" (guixia, kneel down) and "磕头" (ketou) appear consecutively in a single spoken turn, forming a cohesive communicative unit. Rather than separating them artificially, we treat this pairing as a composite behavioral unit to trace how the subtitle compresses sequential actions. These four instances constitute the entire corpus of this qualitative case study.

3.2 Analytical Procedure

Our comparative analysis proceeds in three steps. First, action benchmarking: using the dictionary definition, we break ketou into three components (kneeling, hand support, head near/to ground) and check whether each receives an English lexical counterpart. Second, construal categorization: based on the lexical evidence, each case is classified as "non-explicit coding" (no bodily components mentioned), "schematic coding" (only the basic kneeling posture is retained), or "composite action integration" (a sequence involving multiple bodily or communicative components is condensed into a more compact expression). Third, communicative contextualization: we examine each token against its dramatic context—specifically, whether the line aims to convey emotional attitude (pleading, remorse) or report factual narrative obligations (wager settlements, formal punishment). Figure 1 outlines this analytical progression.

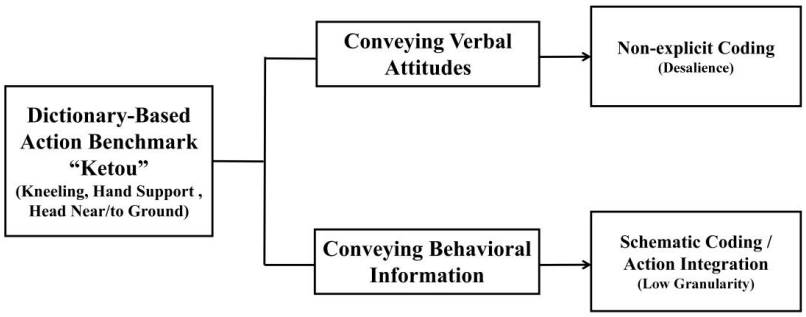


Figure 1. Analytical Path of Subtitle Representations for "Ketou" Bodily-Action Information

Applying this analytical framework yields the overall distribution summarized in Table 1:

Table 1. Representations of "Ketou" Bodily Actions in English Subtitles

Episode	Chinese Dialogue Segment	English Subtitle Segment	Action Representation Feature
EP11	我给你磕头了	*I'm begging you!*	Non-explicit coding; foregrounds pleading intent
EP60	姨娘糊涂，姨娘给你磕头了！	*I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!*	Non-explicit coding; foregrounds remorse and self-blame
EP75	那他们岂不是要给三娘磕头认错？	*Then, they should kneel and apologize?*	Schematic coding; retains foundational kneeling posture
EP84	姐姐给你跪下，给你磕头。	*I'll kneel and apologize!*	Composite action integration; retains kneeling posture and apology, bodily details of ketou left unexpressed

4. Micro-Level Qualitative Analysis

4.1 Communicative Focus on Emotional Stance: Desalience of Bodily Actions

In the four instances examined in this case study, ketou sometimes functions less as a description of physical movement than as a rhetorical means of expressing urgency or contrition. In Episodes 11 and 60, the English subtitles bypass physical mechanics entirely and channel attentional focus directly into the speaker's communicative intent.

【Example 1 (EP11)】

Dramatic Context: Mother Du desperately begs a local official not to expropriate her ancestral home.

Chinese Subtitle: 大人我求求你了，我给你磕头了大人。

English Subtitle: *Please, my lord! Please! I'm begging you!*

Here, “求求你了” (I beg you) and “磕头了” (I kowtow to you) function as a paired plea. The utterance of ketou is an act of verbal self-abasement by a powerless mother trying to stave off immediate disaster. The English subtitle captures this urgency through the repetition of Please and the emphatic I’m begging you! In physical terms, however, the translation uses no motion verbs—no bow, prostrate, kowtow, or kneel. Checked against our benchmark, all three bodily actions (kneeling, hand placement, and lowering the head) are absent from the text. The omission may reflect practical constraints commonly associated with subtitling, although the present study does not measure subtitle length, display duration, or reading speed and therefore cannot establish this as the cause.

【Example 2 (EP60)】

Dramatic Context: Aunt Liu tearfully begs Du Sanniang for forgiveness after her schemes are exposed.

Chinese Subtitle: 玉贞你饶过姨娘吧！姨娘糊涂，姨娘给你磕头了！

English Subtitle: *Camille, forgive me! I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!*

This exchange couples a plea for mercy with acute remorse. Saying “给你磕头了” is a rhetorical bid for leniency through self-diminution. The English subtitle renders “饶过姨娘” as forgive me! and piles on apologies (I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!). As in Example 1, physical movement is omitted. Kneeling, hand planting, and head contact receive no lexical expression. In both cases, when ketou serves primarily to express raw emotion, the subtitles background bodily mechanics in favor of immediate pragmatic goals.

4.2 Schematic Representation and Composite Action Integration

When ketou touches on the fulfillment of a wager or a sworn promise, physical compliance becomes a narrative fact that anchors the plot. In Episodes 75 and 84, the subtitles introduce the posture verb kneel, though the exact mapping varies.

【Example 3 (EP75)】

Dramatic Context: Spectators discuss the outcome of a clan wager regarding the value of gift wine, anticipating public penance.

Chinese Subtitle: 那他们岂不是要给三娘磕头认错？

English Subtitle: *Then, they should kneel and apologize?*

In this wager-settlement context, “认错” (admit fault) defines the communicative goal, while “磕头” denotes the public punitive performance. The English subtitles pair kneel and apologize. Apologize directly encodes the act of repentance, while kneel specifies body posture. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (8th ed.), kneel means “to be in or move into a position where your body is supported on one or both knees” [15]. Comparing this against our benchmark reveals that kneel captures only the initial kneeling phase. Supporting oneself on both hands and bowing to the floor are completely omitted. Rather than detailing the full ritual, the translation adopts a schematic representation, using a basic posture verb to cover the punitive act.

【Example 4 (EP84)】

Dramatic Context: Eldest Sister Du, thoroughly disgraced, offers repeated confessions to Du Sanniang and promises to kneel and kowtow in penance.

Chinese Subtitle: 是大姐错了，大姐跪下给你认错，对不起啊。小妹，我错了，小妹阿姐错了，姐姐给你跪下，给你磕头。

English Subtitle: *I was wrong! I'm so sorry! I'm sorry, Sabrina! I was wrong! Sabrina, forgive me! I'll kneel and apologize!*

Unlike Episode 75, the source text here strings "跪下" (kneel down) and "磕头" (kowtow) together in succession. Looking at the terminal pair ("姐姐给你跪下，给你磕头" vs. "I'll kneel and apologize!"), kneel corresponds to the literal verb guixia (kneel down), while apologize translates the penitent intent behind ketou. The hand-support and head-to-ground phases of ketou receive no separate wording. The subtitle integrates this composite sequence into a single posture (kneel) paired with an explicit apology (apologize). This integration avoids redundant phrasing on screen while preserving the narrative essentials.

4.3 Cross-Case Synthesis and Divergence Patterns

Across the four scenes, the English subtitles follow two divergent paths. From the perspective of prominence, whether bodily actions appear at all depends on whether dialogue serves an emotional or narrative function. In Episodes 11 and 60, where lines express desperate pleas and self-blame, the subtitles drop the physical mechanics and focus exclusively on communicative intent. From the perspective of granularity, how much detail gets retained depends on whether the physical act is an indispensable plot fact. In Episodes 75 and 84, where public penance drives the story forward, the subtitles bring in kneel. Yet even here, the translations avoid granular descriptions of hands planting or heads bowing, opting instead for a broad posture verb or integrating adjacent gestures. In the four instances examined here, the subtitles do not render the bodily action in isolation; instead, the level of textual granularity varies with the dramatic function of each utterance.

5. Discussion

5.1 Local Communicative Priorities as Drivers of Textual Selection

Looking across the four scenes, the pattern is straightforward. In the four scenes examined, the representation of physical movement in the subtitles appears to be closely related to the communicative function of each utterance. When characters use ketou to vent emotion—desperately pleading or begging for forgiveness—the term functions more like an exclamation point than a stage direction. The subtitles react accordingly: they ditch the physical logistics and translate the emotion directly. But when someone has to physically submit to settle a bet or fulfill a sworn confession, dropping the gesture entirely would leave a hole in the plot. In those moments, the subtitle uses a basic verb like kneel to keep the story moving.

5.2 Subtitle Conciseness and the Dilution of Cultural Connotations

Part of this flattening is simply practical. Subtitles have to stay short. Still, streamlining has its costs. In some traditional social contexts, ketou is a culturally marked gesture associated with deference, submission, and hierarchical relations. Its precise implications depend on the relationship between participants and the situation in which the gesture occurs. Dropping to the knees, putting your hands to the floor, and touching your forehead to the ground is far more humiliating than an ordinary kneel. Translating it as kneel keeps the plot clear, but it strips away that physical severity. Kneeling in English carries religious or formal connotations, but rarely the complete self-abasement of pressing one's face to the dirt. This case illustrates a potential dilemma in subtitling culturally marked bodily rituals: concise translations may preserve the immediate narrative meaning while reducing the explicit representation of culturally significant physical details.

5.3 Multimodal Coordination and Audience Reception

The absence of physical details from the subtitle text does not establish that these details are unnoticed by viewers. The visual performance, camera framing, and sound design may still make the actions salient, but the present study does not measure audience attention or reception. On-screen performances, camera framing, and sound design all contribute to the overall message. As Taylor demonstrates, multimodal transcription provides a rigorous framework for tracking how visual and acoustic channels complement verbal text [16]. Future studies could apply multimodal transcription to examine whether visual acting adequately compensates for omissions in the script.

Furthermore, whether viewers notice or care about these omissions cannot be settled by text analysis alone. Perego et al. used eye-tracking, word recognition, and scene recognition tests to measure cognitive processing during subtitled viewing [17]. Reception experiments could test whether different subtitle treatments, such as using literal translations like kowtow versus schematic verbs like kneel, measurably impact an international audience's comprehension of character dynamics and cultural nuance.

6. Conclusion and Limitations

In this study, we used dictionary definitions and Langacker's concepts of prominence and granularity to examine how English subtitles handle the physical details of ketou in *A Mother's Wait: Mom, Dad, I'm Back*. Across the four instances examined in this case study, the subtitles show two recurring patterns: in the two emotionally charged pleas, the physical components of ketou are not explicitly represented in the subtitle text; in the two scenes involving a wager or an obligation, the subtitles use the broader posture verb "kneel" while leaving the hand-support and head-lowering components unexpressed.

The study has obvious limits. Four scenes from a single Microdrama cannot speak for the entire industry. We also deliberately limited our analysis to the written text; while the visual track obviously helps fill in what the subtitles leave out, we did not run formal multimodal measurements on shot lengths, camera angles, or gestures. Nor did we run reception tests with actual viewers. Future work

could easily build on this by expanding the sample to more dramas and different gestures, combining text analysis with eye-tracking or multimodal coding to see how viewers actually process these missing movements.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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