

# Semantic and Communicative Translation in the Subtitle Translation of *The Phantom of the Opera* at the Royal Albert Hall

Yihan Wang\*

Hubei University, Wuhan, Hubei, China

\*Corresponding author: Yihan Wang.

---

## Abstract

This study examines the translated version of *The Phantom of the Opera* at the Royal Albert Hall, produced by Kamigamisubs, and its translation strategies for the musical subtitles, based on Peter Newmark's theories of semantic and communicative translation. In the end, the study concludes that the translators apply both semantic and communicative translation strategies flexibly in dealing with culture-specific elements, syntactic structures and emotional expressions. Transcription and literal translation are used for culture-specific elements such as proper names and opera titles in order to preserve the characteristics of the source language. The use of these strategies, such as the expansion and adaptation of imagery, may enhance the comprehension and accessibility of the song lyrics with special rhythmic features and culture-specific expressions for the target audience. The findings imply that the translation of subtitles for musicals should be a balance between the faithfulness of the original work and the comprehension of the audience. Newmark's translation theory provides an effective analytical framework for this balance, and the findings can offer useful guidance for the translation of similar audiovisual texts.

## Keywords

*The Phantom of the Opera*, subtitle translation in musicals, semantic translation, communicative translation, Newmark's translation theory

---

## 1. Introduction

Andrew Lloyd Webber's classic musical *The Phantom of the Opera* is based on the novel of the same name by Gaston Louis Alfred Leroux. It is the story of a musical genius who lives in secret under the Paris Opera House, who falls in obsessive love with the young soprano Christine, and must ultimately choose between love and letting go. The musical, which premiered in London's West End in 1986, has played in more than 180 cities worldwide and has been seen by more than 140 million people, making it the longest-running musical in Broadway history.

In 2011, the production team celebrated its 25th anniversary with a lavish performance at the Royal Albert Hall featuring Ramin Karimloo as the Phantom and Sierra Boggess as Christine. The show was recorded in its entirety in high definition and broadcast worldwide. *The Phantom of the Opera at the Royal Albert Hall* not

only succeeds in conveying the special appeal of a live theatrical production, but also serves as a communication link between cultures. For Chinese viewers, subtitles are a very important tool to understand the story and enjoy the lyrics. Of the many subtitled versions, the one done by KamigamiSubs has been very well received by viewers for its accuracy and detailed notes. Therefore, in this study, the subtitled version of KamigamiSubs was selected as the object of research.

This study adopts the theories of semantic and communicative translation as developed by the British translation theorist Peter Newmark to systematically analyze the subtitling strategies employed in this version. Semantic Translation emphasizes faithfulness to the author's expression, whereas Communicative Translation prioritizes readers' reception, and the two approaches are applied flexibly according to different contexts. Based on these theories, this study takes several representative examples of subtitles made by KamigamiSubs for the production of *The Phantom of the Opera at the Royal Albert Hall* as the research object, to study the strategic choices made by the translator in the translation of subtitles in musicals. The aim is to offer guidelines for the practical translation of similar audiovisual texts.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Overview of Newmark's Theory

Peter Newmark is regarded as one of the most influential figures in contemporary Western translation studies, and his translation theories have had a profound impact on the academic field. In *Approaches to Translation*, based on Karl Bühler's theory of language functions, Newmark classified texts into three basic categories: expressive, informative, and vocative texts [1]. On this basis, he systematically proposed two major translation strategies for the first time: Semantic Translation and Communicative Translation. Later, in *A Textbook of Translation*, Newmark further refined and elaborated upon these two approaches. Subsequent scholars have expanded and developed Newmark's theories in relation to different text types and discourse contexts.

#### 2.1.1 Semantic Translation

At the center of semantic translation is faithfulness to the original text. Newmark has stated that the purpose of semantic translation is to render as closely as possible the contextual meaning of the original text within the limits of the semantic and syntactic structures of the target language [2]. This method is characterized by high regard for the preservation of the author's linguistic style, patterns of thinking and cultural characteristics of the source language. It is mostly used in expressive texts such as literary texts, official statements, and personal correspondence.

In semantic translation, translators are required to maintain an objective stance and minimize intervention in the source text in order to preserve its linguistic characteristics and unique qualities. Unlike literal translation, semantic translation is not merely a mechanical substitution of words; rather, it places greater emphasis on conveying the deeper meaning within the context.

Further studies have been conducted on the application of Semantic Translation in specific text types. In *Functional Approaches to Translation Studies*, Zhang Meifang conducted a systematic evaluation of the theoretical basis and research methods of the discourse analysis school and the German functionalist school from the perspective of functional linguistics [3]. She argued that functional approaches help preserve stylistic features and rhetorical effects in the case of highly literary and artistic texts, which are essential for the reproduction of the artistic intentions of the original author. Li Changshuan said in *Theory and Practice of Non-literary Translation* that non-literary texts are mainly about information transmission, but in the case of highly precise texts such as legal and regulatory documents, translators should strictly adhere to the semantic content of the original text to avoid information distortion [4].

#### 2.1.2 Communicative Translation

Communicative Translation is a reader-oriented translation strategy, unlike the author-oriented nature of Semantic Translation. Communicative Translation is defined by Newmark as an approach that seeks to "produce in the target readers an effect as close as possible to that obtained on readers of the original".

This method is used mainly with informative and vocative texts, e.g., news reports, advertisements, announcements, popular reading materials. Communicative Translation focuses on the target text being natural, fluent, and easy to understand. The translators are entitled to modify the structure and the mode of expression of the source text in order to eliminate cultural barriers and to guarantee that target readers are able to receive information fluently and produce the communicative effect intended.

Communicative Translation is similar to Nida's theory of Dynamic Equivalence, as both approaches attach great importance to readers' responses [5]. However, Newmark's Communicative Translation focuses more on the practical communicative purposes and realization of communicative effects. In the discussion of pragmatic equivalence, Baker echoed the main concerns of Communicative Translation in stressing the need for translators to pay close attention to the cognitive context and cultural background of target readers and to compensate for cultural differences by using strategies of explicitation and implicitation [6].

In recent years, with the development of audiovisual translation studies, the use of Communicative Translation has been of particular relevance. This approach requires translators, if necessary, to sacrifice some formal features of the source text in favour of clarity, conciseness and communicative effectiveness in the translated text.

### **2.1.3 The Dialectic Relationship of Semantic Translation and Communicative Translation**

Newmark himself did not argue for a hard and fast dichotomy between Semantic and Communicative Translation. His argument was that all translations have elements of both approaches with varying degrees, and their difference is mainly reflected in emphasis. Therefore, translators should select the two flexibly based on text functions, translation purposes and the actual needs of target readers.

In a study on the application of Newmark's theories to the translation of film subtitles, Shi Zhan proposed that the translation of film subtitles should follow a macro-level strategy of "Communicative Translation as the primary approach with Semantic Translation as a supplement when necessary" [7]. The study summarized three major principles of subtitle translation, namely accuracy, conciseness, and audience readability, and identified specific strategies including omission, amplification, restructuring, literal translation, explanation, and substitution. The present study further confirms that Semantic Translation and Communicative Translation are not mutually exclusive but are rather complementary approaches in subtitle translation practice. Such findings provide a theoretical basis for the present study in analyzing the flexible application of translation strategies on subtitle translation in musicals.

## **2.2 Overview of Musical Surtitling**

Audiovisual translation has evolved very fast in the last few decades, and has become an important branch of translation studies. Díaz-Cintas and Remael systematically studied the concept of and practical norms for subtitle translation and argued that subtitle translation is subject to a number of constraints, namely constraints of time (reading speed), constraints of space (screen character limitations), and constraints of the multimodal context (interaction between image and sound) [8]. Gottlieb has also classified subtitle translation as a kind of "diagonal translation" [9] and stressed that it is not only an interlingual transfer but also a cross-modal transformation from spoken language to written language.

As for the translation of stage subtitles, scholars have generally held the opinion that it is quite different from the translation of traditional film or television subtitles. The live, immediate and non-reproducible interaction between audiences and performers in stage productions makes higher demands on subtitle translation. Xiao Lu took *The Phantom of the Opera at the Royal Albert Hall* as an example within the framework of Skopos Theory, and claimed that subtitle translation in musicals can assist target-language audiences in experiencing deeper emotional dimensions of characters and in better understanding the implications of the story, and the responsibility of translators is to reproduce the "soul" of the musical [10].

Moreover, concerning musicals as a special kind of stage performance, Luo Huilin et al. stated that the subtitle translation of musical films is different from other types of translation, as translators need to consider not only the rhythm of music, the visual expression of stage performance, but also the understanding of the audience [11]. All these studies suggest that good musical subtitles should provide semantic information and preserve musical rhythm and emotional intensity.

As for *The Phantom of the Opera*, in Chinese academia, systematic and focused research on its subtitle translation is relatively scarce. In the case of *The Phantom of the Opera at the Royal Albert Hall* by KamigamiSubs, the translation strategies used in dealing with complex cultural images, puns, classical musical terms and extremely dramatic dialogues and lyrics manifest their uniqueness. Up to now, little research has been done to combine Newmark's theory of Semantic Translation and Communicative Translation to analyze how this subtitle version of the musical strikes a balance between reproducing the artistic appeal of the original musical and making it more accessible to the Chinese audience.

Thus, based on the subtitle version of KamigamiSubs, the present study not only contributes to fill the present gap in research on the subtitle translation of *The Phantom of the Opera* but also offers new empirical evidence for the application of Newmark's translation theories in dramatic texts.

### **3. Application of Newmark's Translation Theory in the Subtitle Translation of *The Phantom of the Opera at the Royal Albert Hall***

This part selects typical examples from the KamigamiSubs version of *The Phantom of the Opera at the Royal Albert Hall* and analyzes the strategies and methods used in subtitle translation from the perspective of Newmark's theories of Semantic Translation and Communicative Translation.

#### **3.1 Semantic Translation**

##### **Example 1**

Source Text:

Sold! Your number, sir? Thank you. Lot 663, then. Ladies and gentlemen. A poster for this house's production of "Hannibal" by Chalumeau.

Target Text:

成交! 先生, 您的号码是? 谢谢您。女士们先生们, 那么接下来是第 663 号拍品。来自本剧院的作品, 由夏拉莫创作的歌剧《汉尼拔》的海报。

In this case, the word "Chalumeau" is translated as "夏拉莫" through transliteration, which keeps the foreign characteristics of the original name. Similarly, the title Hannibal is directly transliterated as 汉尼拔 without any further explanation or substitution. The literal translation of such culture-specific elements facilitates the readers' understanding and at the same time preserves the foreign cultural flavor of the original text.

Moreover, the source sentence "A poster for this house's production of 'Hannibal' by Chalumeau" is layered in its information structure, beginning with the nucleus noun "a poster" and then adding modifiers: which theatre? This house; which work? Who wrote Hannibal? Chalumeau The usual Chinese way of putting this is to re-arrange these modifiers to a "front-loading" structure, e.g., "一张夏拉莫创作的本剧院歌剧《汉尼拔》的海报". However, in the translation, the progressive information structure of the source text is preserved as "来自本剧院的作品, 由夏拉莫创作的歌剧《汉尼拔》的海报", rather than restructured according to standard Chinese syntactic patterns. The translation starts with the source of the work, then the author, and finally the object itself, thus preserving most of the original logic of modification and rhythm of information development of the source text.

##### **Example 2**

Source Text:

There was a travelling fair in the city. Tumblers, conjurers, human oddities. A man, locked in a cage. A prodigy, monsieur. Scholar, architect, musician. A composer. And an inventor, too, monsieur. They boasted he had once built for the Shah of Persia a maze of mirrors.

Target Text:

城里来了一个流浪马戏团。杂耍艺人，魔术师，畸形怪人。一个被锁在笼子里的男人。一个奇才，先生。学者，建筑师，音乐家。也是位作曲家。还是位发明家，先生。传说他曾为波斯国王建造镜中迷宫。

This translation is based on the principles of Semantic Translation and employs a literal translation strategy in general. The translation largely preserves the source text's syntactic structure. The original dialogue contains many nominal phrases functioning as complete sentences without explicit predicates: "Tumblers, conjurers, human oddities", "A man, locked in a cage", "Scholar, architect, musician". This broken sentence construction is meant to mimic the fast, disjointed speech of a carnival announcer. The translation keeps this fragmented structure, without any linking elements or transforming the expressions into fully declarative sentences, reproducing the distinct linguistic style of the original dialogue.

Lexically faithful rendering is also used in accordance with semantic considerations. The phrase "a maze of mirrors" has a rich metaphorical implication. The word "maze" itself suggests confusion and disorientation, and mirrors provide infinite reflections and blurred lines between truth and illusion. They create a mysterious and illusory image, and they are in close correspondence with the dark and closed atmosphere of the underground world of the Phantom of the Opera. The translation is "迷宫镜" rather than other possibilities like "镜子迷宫" or "镜子阵". The translator keeps the core elements "mirror" and "maze", but prefers the more literary single-character "镜" instead of the more colloquial "镜子", and the addition of "中" adds a sense of spatial depth. Thus, the translation preserves the literary quality of the original imagery and reproduces its short and metaphorical style.

### Example 3

Source Text:

Think of me, think of me fondly, when we've said goodbye. Remember me, every so often, promise me you'll try.

Target Text:

想念我，深情地想念我，在互道别离后。记得我，每时每刻，答应你会尽力信守。

The temporal adverbial "when we've said goodbye" is located at the end of the sentence in the source text, a structure partially arranged to fit the rhyme and rhythm of the lyrics. The translation, "想念我，深情地想念我，在互道别离后", largely maintains this inverted structure by preserving the temporal element in the final position rather than moving it to the beginning as per conventional Chinese syntax. In terms of rhetoric, the first line of the source text uses repetition to create a tone of pleading. The translation reproduces this repetitive structure without omission. The following line, likewise, enhances emotional intensity through the repetition of imperative expressions, and the translation preserves the same pattern of syntactic progression. Instead of re-structuring the original form to match the conventions of the target language, the translator seeks to preserve the linguistic structure as well as the emotional evolution of the source text, as exemplified in the basic principles of Semantic Translation.

### Example 4

Source Text:

Flattering child, you shall know me. See why in shadow I hide. Look at your face in the mirror. I am there inside.

Target Text:

聪明乖巧的孩子，你了解我。明白我为何隐身于黑暗。望望你镜中容颜的幻影。我就隐身其中。

The translated version remains very close to the original text, and there is no substitution of images of Chinese culture or adjustment of content to Chinese rhythm. The phrase "in shadow I hide" is rendered as "隐身于黑暗", preserving the inversion of the original expression. "I am there inside" is translated as "我就隐身其中", which keeps the syntactic form and semantic content of the source text largely intact. Furthermore, the image of "the self in the mirror" created by "Look at your face in the mirror/I am there inside" gives a Gothic

sense of ambiguity between illusion and reality, which also functions as a recurring stylistic feature of *The Phantom of the Opera*. Instead of translating the meaning into a more explicit psychological description, the translation reproduces this effect by using expressions such as “镜中容颜的幻影” and “隐身其中”.

This example shows that the translator is concerned with faithfully transmitting the imagery and narrative style of the original text, rather than adapting the translation to the conventions of Chinese linguistic habits. The translation pays more attention to the preservation of the original mode of expression and therefore conforms to the basic requirements of the Semantic Translation.

### 3.2 Communicative Translation

#### Example 1

Source Text:

Close your eyes, let your spirit start to soar. And you'll live as you've never lived before.

Target Text:

阖上双眼，让灵魂自由驰骋。你将重获新生，恍若隔世。

The literal translation of the second line, “And you'll live as you've never lived before”, would be more like “你将像从未活过那样生活”. However, the translation gives it as “你将重获新生，恍若隔世”. The translation adopts a different syntactic pattern by splitting the original structure into two four-character phrases rather than using the original “subject + predicate + comparative clause”. Besides, “重获新生” is a compressed reinterpretation of the source meaning, replacing the comparative structure with an idiomatic Chinese expression. The phrase ‘恍若隔世’ could be seen as an example of amplification, as there is no direct equivalent in the source text. It is added to increase the emotional resonance and artistic atmosphere, so as to improve the lyrical and emotional effect of the translation. Moreover, the arrangement of two four-character expressions contributes to the rhythmic balance and makes it more singable and more pleasant to the ear. This is the feature of Communicative Translation that puts emphasis on the reception of the target audience rather than the formal equivalence.

#### Example 2

Source Text:

With feasting and dancing and song/Tonight in celebration

Target Text:

今日良宴会，蝶舞袖香新，歌分落素尘/今夜，我们称觴共庆

In the context of English musical performance, the primary purpose of “With feasting and dancing and song/Tonight in celebration” is to create a festive mood. What is shown to the audience is a list of instant and everyday expressions that bring to mind the festive joy of the community. But for Chinese audiences, the literal translation like “以宴会、舞蹈和歌唱/今夜庆祝” may not create the equivalent ceremonial mood and weaken the emotional impact of the lyrics. The translator's task here is not just to transfer lexical meaning, but to recreate a similar emotional and aesthetic effect for target audiences. Hence, the translator takes a more creative route. The words “feasting”, “dancing”, and “song”, which are more or less common nouns in the source text, are translated as “称觴共庆”, “蝶舞袖香新”, and “歌分落素尘” respectively. The phrase “称觴” is a graceful phrase in classical Chinese poetry that refers to raising a cup in merriment. “蝶舞袖香新” and “歌分落素尘” are images that are commonplace in classical Chinese banquet poetry. The hope is to trigger cultural associations with major holidays and community events familiar to Chinese audiences. This kind of domestication-oriented adaptation takes Chinese readers' aesthetic expectation as its starting point and replaces ordinary words in the source language with more familiar and emotionally evocative poetic images for target readers. There is therefore a sort of equivalence in emotional intensity and aesthetic effect, but not in linguistic form.

Also, the original parallel noun structure is transformed into rhythmically balanced poetic lines. The source syntax is not preserved because the translator attaches more importance to musicality and ceremonial atmosphere than to formal correspondence, which is a feature of reader-oriented Communicative Translation.

### Example 3

Source Text:

Amateurs!

Target Text:

班门弄斧!

The term amateurs is usually used to mean someone inexperienced or unprofessional and has a pejorative tone here, serving as an attack on the other side's lack of ability. Instead of translating it literally as “业余者” or “外行”, the translator renders it as “班门弄斧”, a Chinese idiom meaning to show off one's limited skills in front of an expert. In this example the translator departs from the literal lexical meaning of the source text and resorts to a culturally loaded expression of the target language that is used to perform a similar pragmatic function. The goal is to emulate the scornful and derisive tone of the original dialogue. This strategy is not intended to preserve the formal features of the source text, but to evoke a similar emotional response from the Chinese audience. This example is a typical feature of the Communicative Translation, where translators pay attention to the effect of the target text on the target audience and allow flexible adaptation of linguistic forms to achieve communicative equivalence.

### Example 4

Source Text:

Poor young maiden/For the thrill on your tongue of stolen sweets/You will have to pay the bill/Tangled in the winding sheets

Target Text:

可怜的少女/贪恋舌尖上的甜蜜/你付出代价将会是/一夜春宵如胶似漆

In the context of English musical discourse, this passage produces a tiered warning tone through the imagery of “stolen sweets” and “winding sheets.” The phrase “stolen sweets” metaphorically refers to the thrill of illicit pleasure and the accompanying guilt, while “winding sheets” literally means burial shrouds, but here it also implies tangled bed sheets, thereby merging pleasure with destruction. The excerpt is from the play-within-a-play sequence Don Juan Triumphant. The lyrics are indirectly instrumental in shaping the characterization of Don Juan. Don Juan is supposed to be a charming libertine, clever at lying and seducing. However, a more literal translation that maintains the stronger connotations of death might highlight the more sinister implications of the original imagery and perhaps alter audiences' perception of Don Juan's characterization. Therefore, the image modification is to maintain the intended characterization. At the lexical level, the phrase “stolen sweets” is weakened to “甜蜜” and “Tangled in the winding sheets” is replaced by “一夜春宵如胶似漆”. The phrase “如胶似漆” (like glue and lacquer) has positive and passionate connotations in the Chinese context and is familiar to target audiences, and therefore, easier to evoke emotional resonance. The translation softens the darker parts of the original, making Don Juan a smooth-talking seducer rather than a threatening figure. Moreover, although there are no apparent rhyme patterns in the source text, the translated lines rhyme by combining “蜜” and “漆”, thus enhancing the musicality and acoustic effect of the translated lyrics.

Therefore, it can be seen that the translation is committed to the theatrical experience of the target-language audiences throughout the translation process. This is indicative of the central characteristic of Communicative Translation, namely its reader-oriented nature and its allowance for restructuring and adaptation of the original text in order to achieve the intended communicative effect.

## 4. Conclusion

This study takes the subtitle version of *The Phantom of the Opera at the Royal Albert Hall* by KamigamiSubs as the corpus and explores the subtitle translation strategies in musicals from the perspective of Peter Newmark's theories of Semantic Translation and Communicative Translation. The analysis of representative examples shows that the translators mix the semantic and the communicative approach in a flexible manner in the work with culture-specific items, syntactic structures, emotional expressions and musical rhythm. These strategies are based on the principles of Semantic Translation. They include transliteration, preservation of syntactic structures and transmission of cultural imagery, which preserve the linguistic and artistic characteristics of the source text. According to the principles of Communicative Translation, some strategies such as syntactic restructuring, amplification and cultural substitution are used to improve the readability, musicality and emotional appeal for the Chinese readers. Combining these two approaches preserves the artistic appeal of the original work, while enhancing accessibility in cross-cultural communication. This study offers a new case for applying Newmark's theories to the field of audiovisual translation studies. It also indicates that an effective translation of subtitles for musicals should make flexible adjustments between the semantic and the communicative dimensions in response to the features of the texts and the audience's reception.

## References

- [1] Newmark, P. (1981). *Approaches to Translation*. Pergamon Press: Oxford.
- [2] Newmark, P. (1988). *A Textbook of Translation*. Prentice-Hall International: London.
- [3] Zhang, M.F. (2005). *Functional Approaches to Translation Studies*. Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press: Shanghai.
- [4] Li, C.S. (2012). *Theory and Practice of Non-literary Translation*. China Translation & Publishing House: Beijing.
- [5] Nida, E.A. (1964). *Toward a Science of Translating*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- [6] Baker, M. (1992). *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation*. Routledge: London.
- [7] Shi, Z. (2020). Subtitle Translation from the Perspective of Semantic and Communicative Translation: A Case Study of Friends (Season 7). *Journal of Jilin Provincial Institute of Education*, 36(8), 155–158.
- [8] Díaz-Cintas, J., Remael, A. (2021). *Subtitling: Concepts and Practices*. Routledge: London.
- [9] Gottlieb, H. (1992). Subtitling—a new university discipline. In: Dollerup C, Loddegaard A (Eds.), *Teaching Translation and Interpreting: Training, Talent and Experience* (pp. 161–170). John Benjamins: Amsterdam.
- [10] Xiao, L. (2018). Musical Subtitle Translation from the Perspective of Skopos Theory: A Case Study of The Phantom of the Opera at the Royal Albert Hall. *Journal of Qiqihar Junior Teachers' College*, (2), 61–63.
- [11] Luo, H.L., Jiang, Z.T., Huang, L.T., Jia, L.W., Huang, X.Y. (2023). Application of Peter Newmark's Communicative and Semantic Translation in Musical Subtitle Translation: A Case Study of Les Misérables. *Comparative Study of Cultural Innovation*, 7(16), 21–25.

## Funding

This research received no external funding.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### **Acknowledgment**

This paper is an output of the science project.

### **Copyrights**

Copyright for this article is retained by the author (s), with first publication rights granted to the journal. This is an open - access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).