

A Study on Film Subtitle Translation for *Flipped* Based on Semantic Translation and Communicative Translation Theories

Leyi Wu*

Shaanxi University of Science and Technology Xi'an, Shaanxi, China

**Corresponding author: Leyi Wu.*

Abstract

In today's world, frequent cultural exchanges among nations have made film a vital vehicle for cultural communication. Consequently, the importance of film subtitle translation has become increasingly prominent. The American film *Flipped*, with its fresh and warm style, tells an innocent and budding love story between the protagonists, conveying simple, pure, and heartwarming values and insights into personal growth. Based on Newmark's theories of semantic and communicative translation, this paper finds that the film's Chinese subtitles flexibly employ methods such as literal translation, free translation, addition, and conversion of parts of speech. These strategies not only effectively convey the original text's meaning and emotions but also help broaden the film's reach.

Keywords

semantic translation, communicative translation, flipped, film subtitle translation

1. Introduction

As the dissemination of cultural products accelerates, films have become indispensable vehicles for cross-cultural communication among peoples, and subtitle translation plays a crucial role in the internationalization of a film. Subtitle translation is characterized by real-time delivery, spatial constraints, and cultural sensitivity. It must remain faithful to the original text, accurately conveying its meaning, while also demonstrating flexibility by accommodating the linguistic habits and reading rhythms of the target audience. The film *Flipped*, directed by Rob Reiner, was released in the United States in 2010 and has gained widespread popularity globally. Adapted from Wendelin Van Draanen's novel of the same title, the film depicts the innocent and pure romance between Juli and Bryce, focusing on their emotional development and inner transformations from first meeting to the resolution of misunderstandings.

Upon its release, the film attracted considerable scholarly attention both domestically and internationally. In China, most research on film subtitle translation has been conducted from perspectives such as functional equivalence or Skopos Theory. However, studies based on Peter Newmark's communicative and semantic translation theories—specifically applied to the subtitle translation of warm, youth-oriented films—remain underexplored. This paper, grounded in Newmark's framework, analyzes the Chinese and English subtitles of *Flipped* to investigate how subtitle translation can balance the communicative effect in the target language

with the preservation of source-language cultural features. The goal is to enable viewers to perceive the characters' emotional nuances while appreciating the film's cultural connotations. By enhancing subtitle translation with semantic fidelity, the study aims to improve audience enjoyment and promote cross-cultural audiovisual dissemination and linguistic exchange.

2. Literature Review

2.1 A Brief Introduction of Newmark's Theories

For a long time, discussions on translation theories revolved around literal vs. free translation and domestication vs. foreignization. However, most of these methods and strategies considered only the source text, without taking into account the target audience's preferences, the type of text to be translated, or the purpose of translation [1]. Peter Newmark, a renowned British translator and translation theorist, argued that this model severely limits the translator's initiative. Therefore, in his 1981 book *Approaches to Translation*, he creatively proposed the concepts of semantic translation and communicative translation, breaking away from the traditional binary opposition of translation methods, opening up a new domain in translation theory, and offering new insights for translators in their practice.

Newmark posits that the core of semantic translation should be the original author, emphasizing the maximally faithful recreation of the original text's contextual meaning, linguistic form, and stylistic style, provided that the syntactic and semantic structures of the target language permit. This approach seeks to minimize any addition, deletion, or modification of the original content, strictly adhering to its logical expression, and striving for a high degree of correspondence in meaning and structure between the translation and the original, thereby enabling the translated text to convey the author's purpose and genuinely express their intended emotions [2].

In contrast to semantic translation, communicative translation places the target language reader at its core, with the primary goal of producing an effect on the target readers as closely as possible to that achieved on the source readers by the original text. It focuses on whether the information conveyed in the source text is effectively transmitted and how well it is received by the target audience. This approach grants translators greater flexibility in practice, allowing them, on the basis of respecting the original content and faithfully conveying its core information, to make appropriate adjustments, rewritings, or even simplifications concerning lexical choices, syntactic structures, and cultural imagery, in light of the linguistic conventions, sociocultural background, and audience preferences and cognitive levels of the target language. By breaking free from the formal constraints of the original, the translation becomes clearer, more fluent, and more natural, thus achieving effective cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communication [3].

Newmark's theories of semantic and communicative translation are strategic approaches proposed to serve linguistic functions and achieve translation purposes. They are not diametrically opposed but rather complementary, each with distinct emphases, jointly supporting the translator's practice. In the process of translation, practitioners should take into account factors such as text type and function, audience needs, and contextual realities, flexibly applying both theories.

As early as the 1980s, dedicated research on Newmark's translation theories began in China. Since then, numerous scholars have conducted in-depth discussions on the connotations, theoretical contributions, and practical value of semantic and communicative translation, yielding substantial results. In terms of theoretical interpretation, Zhao Jingtao, drawing on Newmark's text typology, analyzed the suitability of semantic and communicative translation in different text types with illustrative examples, while also noting that there is no direct correspondence between text type and translation theory, reminding translators to use translation methods flexibly. Shi Xiaohong, through a comparison of Newmark's theories with German functionalist translation theory, clarified their essential differences in translation purposes and guiding principles, and analyzed their distinct application scenarios and significance [4]. In terms of practical application research, Newmark's theories have been widely applied in literature, business, cultural outreach, science and technology, and other fields. For example, Liu Long and Chen Lizhu selected Staunton's English translation of *Ta Tsing Leu Lee* as their research subject, and through extensive analysis of the translation strategies of legal terms, offered new insights for the translation of legal terminology, particularly ancient

Chinese legal texts [5]. At the same time, the application of Newmark's semantic and communicative translation theories to audiovisual subtitle translation remains limited and warrants further advancement.

2.2 Previous Study on Film Subtitle Translation

As a key component of film dissemination, film subtitle translation is not merely a practice of linguistic conversion but also a vital bridge for cross-cultural communication among nations. Research on film subtitle translation in China has entered a new phase since the last century.

In the 1980s, alongside the flourishing development of dubbed films in China, research on subtitle translation began to emerge. However, studies during this period were largely confined to experience-based summaries at the linguistic level, without forming a systematic theory.

Entering the 1990s, with the widespread adoption of CD technology and reduced disc-burning costs, films became increasingly prevalent in daily life. The growing cultural and emotional needs of the audience raised expectations for Chinese subtitles in foreign films—no longer merely comprehension, but fluency and natural harmony with the visual narrative. This propelled subtitle translation research into a golden era. For instance, discussions on the classic translation of “My Heart Will Go On” from the film *The Titanic* reflect that translators were no longer satisfied with literal meaning but pursued deeper artistic effect [6].

Since the 21st century, Eugene Nida's Functional Equivalence and Hans Vermeer's Skopos Theory have become the focus of translation theory research, with the debate between domestication and foreignization evolving into a hot topic. Research on subtitle translation during this period has featured a combination of theory and case analysis. For example, Bao Lei, using the American TV series *Modern Family Season 2* as material, explored the characteristics and translational constraints of audiovisual subtitles while demonstrating the applicability of Functional Equivalence in colloquial subtitle translation [7].

In recent years, increasingly sophisticated post-production techniques and the rapid rise of artificial intelligence have made multimodal discourse analysis and AI translation high-frequency keywords. Film subtitle translation now demands closer alignment with visuals, sound, and theme, while also restoring the cultural context and preserving the original film's cultural nuances on the basis of semantic fidelity and linguistic fluency [8]. AI technology has profoundly impacted subtitle translation: neither pure human translation nor pure machine translation remains optimal. The cultural awareness of human translators and the efficiency of machine translation complement each other, and human-machine collaboration is expected to grow and develop [9].

3. Case Analysis

As a classic coming-of-age romance film, *Flipped* features not only vivid everyday conversations and thought-provoking philosophical lines but also psychological descriptions that capture the protagonists' nuanced emotions. The Chinese translation of its English subtitles extensively reflects the principles of semantic and communicative translation. Grounded in these two theories, this paper categorizes the film's classic and highly representative lines, using them as case studies to explore the rationale, practical application, and overall effectiveness of the subtitle translation strategies employed. Based on this analysis, the paper further reflects on how to better achieve a balance between semantic fidelity and expressive fluency in the translation of film subtitles.

3.1 The Application of Semantic Translation

Semantic translation emphasizes fidelity to the source text while reproducing the author's intended meaning as fully as possible. In film subtitle translation, it is particularly suitable for lyrical monologues, philosophically charged lines, or utterances employing specific rhetorical devices. Such texts embody the original's linguistic style and emotional tone, which are crucial to character portrayal. Adhering to semantic translation allows these elements to be preserved to the greatest extent, thereby conveying the source text's nuances with precision.

1a. The first day I met Bryce Loski, I Flipped. It was those eyes, something in those dazzling eyes.

1b. 遇到布莱斯·罗斯基的第一天，我怦然心动。是那双眼睛，那双明亮逼人的眼睛有某种魔力。

Analysis: In the film *Flipped*, there are numerous words depicting the inner activities of the protagonist and antagonist, as well as other concrete imagery. In the process of subtitle translation, literal translation should be adopted as much as possible to preserve these descriptive lines and avoid the dullness and emotional loss caused by free translation. For instance, the translation of this very sentence follows the principle of semantic translation. The original meaning of “dazzling” is “耀眼的，炫目的”. In this sentence, a literal approach is taken to render “dazzling eyes” as “明亮逼人的眼睛”, fully retaining the original’s detailed description of the character’s appearance—neither adding extra embellishments nor omitting descriptive adjectives. This allows Chinese audiences to clearly understand why Juli falls for Bryce at first sight. Moreover, the depiction of Bryce’s eyes also serves as a recurring motif throughout the film, making the narrative more coherent and natural.

2a. The one who was walking around with my first kiss.

2b. 保留着我的初吻的那个人。

Analysis: This is a typical attributive clause, where “who” introduces a restrictive attributive clause modifying the core noun “the one”, placing the emphasized element—“walking around with my first kiss”—in the latter part. This highlights Bryce’s uniqueness and exclusivity to Juli. At the same time, by having Juli utter this line, it subtly reveals the tender yet profound emotional bond between them, achieving two purposes at once. Rather than following the conventional subject-verb-object structure in Chinese and rendering the sentence as “那个人保留着我的初吻”, the translation adheres to the principle of semantic translation by preserving the original attributive clause structure. It converts the postpositive attributive into a prepositional modifier “.....的人”, faithfully restoring the original sentence’s focus while retaining Juli’s implicit sense of possessiveness toward Bryce. In doing so, it achieves a dual unity of syntactic structure and emotional semantics.

3a. A painting is more than the sum of its parts. A cow by itself is just a cow. A meadow by itself is just grass, flowers. And the sun peeking through the trees is just a beam of light. But you put them all together and it can be magic.

3b. 一幅画并不是它各个部分的简单相加。一头牛单独看只是一头牛，一片草地单独看只是青草、花儿，阳光透过树丛也只不过是一道光线，但你把它们放在一起，奇迹就发生了。

Analysis: Many lines spoken by Juli’s father and Bryce’s grandfather in the film are highly philosophical and constitute part of its spiritual core. Such texts should be translated with maximum preservation of the original semantics and logic, enabling the target audience to deeply grasp the intended ideas. The following is a classic line from Juli’s father, implying that one should not judge a person solely by appearance but understand the whole picture before making a decision. In rendering this line, the translator adhered to the principle of semantic translation. The three concrete parallel structures—“A cow by itself...”, “A meadow by itself...”, and “And the sun...”—are uniformly translated as “只是...”, thus forming a parallel structure and retaining the rhetorical beauty of the original. Meanwhile, the phrase “more than the sum of its parts” is literally translated as “并不是它各个部分的简单相加”, concisely articulating the life philosophy that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

3.2 The Application of Communicative Translation

Communicative translation prioritizes the audience’s experience and comprehension, aiming for effective communication. It is suitable for daily conversations, colloquial texts, and culturally specific expressions. Through appropriate syntactic adjustments, semantic conciseness, and substitution of source expressions with culturally equivalent ones in the target language, it enhances the translation to align with the cultural context and stylistic norms of the target language. This approach not only improves audience acceptance but also facilitates the cross-cultural dissemination of films.

4a. Sherry Stalls was nothing but a whiny, gossipy, backstabbing flirt. All hair and no substance.

4b. 谢莉·斯托尔斯一无是处，只爱发牢骚、八卦、挖墙脚、跟人调情，头发长见识短。

Analysis: This line is Juli’s critique of a female classmate—concise and sharp, heavily subjective and colloquial, embodying typical American spoken English. It vividly captures Juli’s inner reaction upon

witnessing Bryce's closeness to others. Rather than literally translating words like "whiny" and "gossipy" into adjective forms such as "爱抱怨的" or "爱说闲话的", the translator converts adjectives into verbs and adapts the expressions to fit Chinese colloquial speech. The commonly used phrases "爱发牢骚、八卦、挖墙脚" effectively convey the character's resentment in a way that allows the audience to quickly grasp her emotions. Furthermore, the translator adopts a free translation approach, rendering "All hair and no substance" into the Chinese saying "头发长见识短". This not only aligns with the original meaning of superficiality without substance but also conveys the message in a more accessible manner, achieving the communicative goal of aligning the translated effect with that of the source text.

5a. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

5b. 真不愧是一家人，上梁不正下梁歪。

Analysis: This phrase is originally a classic English proverb, implying that children often inherit or exhibit traits similar to their parents, analogous to the Chinese saying "like father, like son". In the film, Bryce's friend utters this line after learning that Juli's uncle has a congenital defect, intending to persuade Bryce to stop pursuing Juli. A literal translation might prevent Chinese viewers unfamiliar with English from immediately grasping its meaning, and consequently, they would fail to understand why Bryce immediately "wanted to yell at him", thus hindering their viewing experience. Therefore, following the communicative translation strategy, the line is rendered as the culturally equivalent Chinese saying "上梁不正下梁歪", with the added phrase "真不愧是一家人", removing comprehension barriers and aligning with Chinese cultural context, thereby helping the audience grasp the implied meaning.

6a. Some of us get dipped in flat, some in satin, some in gloss. But every once in a while you find someone who's iridescent. And when you do, nothing will ever compare.

6b. 有人住高楼，有人在深沟，有人光万丈，有人一身锈，世人千万种，浮云莫去求，斯人若彩虹，遇上方知有。

Analysis: This sentence is Grandpa Chet's heartfelt reflection upon seeing the felled sycamore tree, addressed to Bryce, and stands as the most touching soul of the entire film. The terms flat, satin, and gloss originally refer to three sheen levels of paint, now used metaphorically to describe people of different temperaments and circumstances. The translator creatively transforms the original imagery of sheen into imagery more readily accepted by Chinese audiences: "住高楼" versus "在深沟" creates a spatial contrast, alluding to possible vast differences in social status; "光万丈" versus "一身锈" produces a striking visual contrast, offering a vivid pictorial effect. The translation adopts the metrical form of the traditional five-character ancient poem, employing rhetorical devices such as parallelism and rhyme to render the original prose-like expression poetically, thereby imbuing it with distinctive Chinese cultural characteristics—concise, vivid, and evocative. This serves as a compelling illustration of the communicative translation strategy. Adhering to the principle of semantic translation would preserve the original imagery, but Chinese audiences would find such gloss-related metaphors relatively unfamiliar, significantly diminishing their cinematic experience—far less effective than the communicative translation, which is more immediately comprehensible and memorable, enabling them to achieve an emotional response comparable to that of English-speaking audiences.

4. Conclusion

This paper, grounded in Peter Newmark's theories of semantic and communicative translation, selects the Chinese and English subtitles of the classic film *Flipped* as its research object. By analyzing various types of texts across different contexts in the film, it explores the practical application methods and differences between the two theories, offering new insights into strategy selection for film subtitle translation to achieve both semantic fidelity and enhanced audience reception.

In terms of semantic translation, the paper focuses on internal monologues and lines that are descriptive or philosophical. These are translated using literal methods that preserve rhetorical devices and sentence structures, effectively conveying the original message and linguistic features to the audience, thereby achieving semantic fidelity. In terms of communicative translation, the paper focuses on everyday spoken

language and culturally specific expressions. Techniques such as word class conversion and synonym substitution are employed to reduce comprehension difficulties, making the translation more accessible and aligned with the linguistic habits and cognitive patterns of Chinese audiences, thus achieving the goal of facilitating communication.

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