

A Study on Film Subtitle Translation of *Nobody* from the Perspective of Semantic Translation and Communicative Translation

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Abstract

Against the background of the expanding global outreach of Chinese culture, the international communication of domestic animated films relies heavily on high-quality subtitle translation. Based on semantic translation and communicative translation theories, this paper takes the English subtitles of the Chinese animated film *Nobody* as the research object, probes into the translation strategies and practical effects of semantic translation, communicative translation and their combined application. It aims to provide practical references for subtitle translation of Chinese animated films and facilitate more effective international communication of such films.

Keywords

semantic translation, communicative translation, subtitle translation, *Nobody*

1. Introduction

With the growing international influence of Chinese culture, Chinese animation has become a vital vehicle for Chinese culture to go global, thanks to its unique cultural charm and artistic innovation. In recent years, China's animation industry has achieved leapfrog development from quantitative expansion to qualitative upgrading. A large number of high-quality Chinese animated works featuring oriental aesthetic conception, profound cultural heritage and contemporary spirit have successively entered the global market, opening a new window for overseas audiences to understand Chinese culture.

Set against the backdrop of the classic mythological work *Journey to the West*, the animated film *Nobody* boldly breaks away from the traditional heroic narrative framework and tells a story from the perspective of ordinary underdog characters. A group of small monsters in Lang Lang Mountain disguise themselves as Tang Monk and his disciples to embark on the pilgrimage for Buddhist scriptures, yet they gain friendship and growth through their adventures. As a blockbuster in the 2025 summer film season, the film has sparked heated discussions among numerous viewers for its distinctive cultural features and sincere emotional expression. Artistically, the film integrates traditional Chinese ink-wash painting style with modern animation techniques, blends absurd comedy elements into a passionate adventure story, and reflects the spiritual core of ordinary individuals pursuing self-identity and realizing value in adversity, making it a benchmark Chinese animated work with both cultural value and emotional depth.

As a core bridge breaking cultural barriers and connecting overseas audiences, subtitle translation bears the dual mission of linguistic transformation and cultural communication. It should not only accurately convey the linguistic style and core meaning of the original work, but also adapt to the cultural context and cognitive habits of target-language audiences. The quality of subtitle translation directly determines the overseas communication effect of the work. Therefore, based on Peter Newmark's theories of semantic translation and communicative translation, combined with specific subtitle translation cases in *Nobody*, this paper makes an in-depth analysis of the practical application of the two translation strategies in the film's dialogue translation, so as to offer theoretical references and practical guidance for the international communication of Chinese animated films.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Overview of Newmark's Theories

Text typology is a core branch of German functionalist translation theory. Its development originated from the pioneering research of Katharina Reiss and was inherited and refined by the renowned British translator Peter Newmark, forming a system with both theoretical profundity and practical guidance. In *Translation Criticism: Potentials and Limitations*, Reiss first systematically put forward text typology based on Karl Bühler's trichotomy of language functions, classifying texts into four categories: informative, expressive, operative and auditory media [1]. She established the core principle that "text type determines translation strategy", providing a function-oriented evaluation criterion for translation criticism [2]. Jeremy Munday pointed out that Reiss's text typology has two key points: first, the equivalence concept proposed by Reiss is rooted in the communicative function of the whole text; second, her proposition has a solid theoretical foundation [3]. Andrew Chesterman commented that Reiss's theory "exerts an important influence on and makes a significant contribution to contemporary translation theory" [4].

On the basis of Reiss's theory, Newmark adopted a linguistic functional approach and argued that different translation methods should be applied to different text types. He categorized texts into expressive, informative, vocative, aesthetic, phatic and metalingual functions, further strengthening the connection between text typology and translation practice, and closely combined text typology with the two major strategies: semantic translation and communicative translation. He simplified Reiss's four-category classification into three types: expressive, informative and vocative, and clarified the translation priorities for different types of texts. Expressive texts prioritize semantic translation to remain faithful to the original style, requiring translators to pay attention to unusual collocations, syntax and original metaphors in individual texts [5]. Informative texts usually involve reorganizing information in translation, so translated texts may sometimes be superior to the original; vocative texts require translators to consider both the linguistic and cultural background of the source language and the pragmatic effect of the target language before translation [6]. These two types of texts focus on communicative translation to ensure audience comprehension.

Translation is a purposeful cross-linguistic communicative activity, which inevitably involves text processing. Translators should formulate translation strategies and produce different target texts according to text functions, translation purposes, target readers and other relevant factors [7].

Newmark conducts translation theory research from the perspective of linguistics, focusing on the combination of theory and practice. In his book *Approaches to Translation* published in 1981, he clearly proposed "semantic translation" and "communicative translation" for the first time. This theoretical breakthrough has broken the dualistic dilemma of literal translation and free translation that has long been limited to the translation industry, and has greatly opened up a new horizon of translation research. For the deepening of subsequent translation theory research and the development of various translation practices, it has an irreplaceable important guiding significance [8].

Newmark's definition of semantic translation is: "Translators only try to reproduce the exact context meaning of the original author within the limitations of the object syntax and meaning". The strategy takes the source language and the original author as the core, and focuses on retaining the structure, writing style and cultural connotation of the original text. Compared with literal translation, it is more flexible and does not mechanically pursue the complete correspondence of words. It tries to find a balance between the original text and the target text, and fully presents the author's intention and specific style [9]. Even if there is a bias in

expression or semantic ambiguity in the original text, semantic translation still requires the translator to be faithful to the original text and reproduce the original content and ideas to the greatest extent.

In contrast, communicative translation is oriented to the target language readers and regards translation activities as a communication process in social situations. Its core purpose is to “strive to make the effect of the translation on the target language readers the same as the effect of the original text on the source language readers”, so that the translated readers have a reading response that is almost consistent with the source language readers, which narrows the gap between readers' reading feelings. In the practice of communicative translation, translators have a greater degree of translation freedom. They can optimize the reader's experience by interpreting the original text, adjusting the style, eliminating ambiguity, and even correcting the errors of the original author's expression, accurately conveying the core content of the original text in a way acceptable to readers, helping readers obtain information efficiently and maximize the translation effect. The result is equivalent to the effect of the original text, and the translation as a whole tends to be interpreted.

In contrast, communicative translation is oriented toward target readers, treating translation as a communicative process in social contexts. Its core purpose is “to strive to produce the same effect on the target-language readers as is produced by the original on the source-language readers”—enabling target readers to have a reading response nearly identical to that of source readers and narrowing the gap in their reading experiences. In communicative translation practice, translators have considerable freedom. They can enhance the reader experience by explaining the original text, adjusting its style, eliminating ambiguity, or even correcting errors in the author's expressions. In doing so, they can accurately convey the core content of the original text in a way that is accessible to readers, help readers obtain information efficiently, and maximize the equivalence between the effect of the translated text and the original. Overall, such translations tend to lean toward free translation.

Newmark clearly pointed out that the two translations are not separated from each other and completely opposite, but have inherent relevance and complementarity. Both need to conform to the target language norms and faithfully convey the core idea of the text. In translation practice, there is no absolute communicative translation or absolute semantic translation [10]. Translators need to dynamically balance the proportion of use of the two strategies in combination with the purpose of translation. Translators can cross-use two strategies according to the text type and translation needs to flexibly adapt to different passages of the same text [11]. However, when there is a conflict between the use of the two translation methods, communicative translation should be given priority to ensuring the realization of the communicative effect.

In short, semantic translation is objective and rigorous, preserving source-language cultural features and making the target text close to the original in form; communicative translation takes reader experience as the primary consideration, reduces cultural barriers, optimizes linguistic expression and ensures fluency and naturalness of the target text. Semantic translation and communicative translation each have advantages and disadvantages, and coordination is necessary; otherwise, translation quality will decline [12].

2.2 Overview of Film Subtitle Translation

Subtitle translation is a unique linguistic conversion practice, whose core is to condense and refine oral audiovisual content and realize cross-linguistic and cross-cultural information dissemination via written subtitles. It also serves as a vital medium for cross-cultural exchange of film and television works [13]. In the context of globalization, cross-border communication of film and television works has become increasingly common. As an important link for cultural communication, film subtitle translation has been gradually improved over time, laying a solid theoretical foundation for film and television translation practices.

Early subtitle translation research focused on basic theoretical sorting and established a basic research framework. Relevant scholars pointed out that film and television translation has gradually developed into an important branch in the translation field, and subtitle translation, as its core and most common form, directly determines the cross-cultural communication effect of film and television texts and audience reception experience [14]. Other scholars summarized the core characteristics of subtitle translation by integrating three factors: time and space constraints, information functions and cultural differences, proposing that translators should flexibly adjust translation methods under limited conditions to ensure accurate and efficient information transmission [15]. Some scholars made further supplements on this basis, pointing out that film subtitles are characterized by colloquialism, characterization and emotionalization, and translators should select appropriate

translation methods according to text characteristics, balancing information output and emotional expression [16]. With the development of translation theories, various classic theories have been introduced into subtitle translation research. Among them, Newmark's theories of semantic translation and communicative translation have yielded fruitful results in film and television subtitle translation research due to their strong practicability.

The above studies have provided solid theoretical support for this paper. However, most relevant studies focus on classic feature films or commercial blockbusters, and special research on Chinese animated films is relatively insufficient. There is still an obvious gap in special subtitle translation case studies for animated works like *Nobody* that integrate Chinese culture, realistic metaphors and popular colloquial language.

In summary, Newmark's theories of semantic translation and communicative translation have been widely applied in the field of film subtitle translation, but special research on subtitle translation of *Nobody* is still insufficient. The linguistic style and cultural attributes of the film's subtitles are highly compatible with the application of this theory. Therefore, guided by this theory, this paper explores the application strategies of the two translation methods combined with specific cases, fills the research gap, and provides references for subtitle translation and cultural communication of Chinese animated films.

3. Case Analysis of Subtitle Translation From the Perspective of Semantic Translation and Communicative Translation

As an important carrier of cross-cultural communication, bilingual film subtitles should not only convey semantic information but also take into account the audience's viewing experience. The subtitle translation of *Nobody* needs to strike a balance between restoring the characteristics of the national customs and ensuring the smooth understanding of the audience, and Newmark's theory of semantic translation and communicative translation provides suitable analytical guidance for this problem. This article will take the official Chinese and English bilingual subtitles of the film as the object of study, and explore the specific embodiment and performance effect of the two translation strategies and their comprehensive application in the film.

3.1 Analysis on Subtitle Translation of *Nobody* From the Perspective of Semantic Translation

Semantic translation is the author-centered, aiming to fully convey the semantics and cultural connotation of the original text, retain the language style and unique expression of the original author, and deepen the principle of literal translation and faithfulness. Its core is to restore the thinking process and language characteristics of the original text as much as possible, and not to change the sentence style and cultural information of the original work at will.

In the film *Nobody*, semantic translation is mostly adopted in lines containing distinctive Chinese cultural imagery and personalized character expressions, so as to preserve the cultural traits and character settings of the work. This part analyzes the specific application and practical effects of semantic translation in subtitle translation with typical examples.

Example 1

Original:妖怪/浪浪山/孙悟空/齐天大圣/金箍棒

Translation: Yao / Lang Lang Mountain / Sun Wukong / The Great Sage / a golden staff

Analysis: This group of cultural-specific nouns is the core cultural symbol and worldview foundation of the film. The translator adopts the method of combining transliteration and literal translation, strictly follows the faithfulness requirements of semantic translation, and uses Chinese Pinyin literal transliteration for the place names and names in the film, retaining the original pronunciation and unique cultural characteristics; for the title "The Great Sage" and the magic weapon "a golden staff", uses literal translation to restore the connotation. This processing method not only ensures the accurate transmission of the original information and the unbiased cultural image, but also allows overseas audiences to directly contact the original symbols of Chinese mythology, avoid the dilution of cultural characteristics due to excessive interpretation, and maintain the overall national style aesthetic background of the film.

Example 2

Original:我们在这急得和热锅上的蚂蚁似的，你还有心情在这里洗澡？

Translation: We're panicking like ants on a hot pan over here. How are you in the mood for a bath?

Analysis: This line appears in the scene where the three little monsters plan to rescue the toad monster, only to find that he is already bathing and enjoying himself in the big pot meant to stew Tang Monk. The translator uses literal translation to completely retain the metaphorical image, syntactic structure and emotional tone of the original text. The translator does not change the metaphor of “ants on a hot pan” to cater to English habits, and strictly follows the requirements of semantic translation fidelity. Because the metaphor is easy to understand in Chinese and English, the literal translation not only retains the vividness of spoken Chinese, but also allows overseas audiences to accurately understand the anxiety of the characters, and realizes the synchronous transmission of information and emotions.

3.2 Analysis on Subtitle Translation of Nobody From the Perspective of Communicative Translation

Communicative translation is reader-centered, advocating the reorganization of syntax and routine expression, so as to make the translation fluent and easy to understand. It allows translators to get rid of the shackles of the original text structure, adjust logic, eliminate redundant expression, and take the acceptance of the target audience as the primary goal to achieve smooth information transmission and cross-cultural communication. The transiency and conciseness of subtitle translation require the translation to have a high degree of readability, and the communicative translation strategy just meets this demand.

In the film, communicative translation is mainly applied to handle Chinese idioms, colloquial expressions and other content likely to cause cultural comprehension barriers. This part analyzes its function in optimizing audience viewing experience with specific cases.

Example 3

Original:你混哪的？/自己混。/野生的呀！

Translation: Who do you run with? /I run solo./Freelancer!

Analysis: This dialogue takes place in a social scene where little monsters ask about each other's backgrounds. “混哪的”，“自己混” and “野生的” are typical daily colloquial expressions in Chinese, and literal translation can hardly help overseas audiences understand the implied social meanings. In the translation process, the translator adopts free translation and replaces culture-specific Chinese slang with common English expressions to prioritize the accurate delivery of the communicative intention. “Who do you run with?” fits English daily usage for asking about social affiliation; “I run solo.” concisely shows the little monster's independent living state; “Freelancer” corresponds to the free and unrestrained state expressed by “野生的”. Focusing on the target audiences' comprehension habits, these translated lines are concise and natural, meet the timeliness demand of subtitles, comply with the target-audience-oriented principle of communicative translation, and enable overseas audiences to quickly enter the social context under the film's worldview.

Example 4

Original: 配角？就只配了两句话呀？这算配角吗？这是透明人！

Translation: A side kick? Only gets two lines? That's not a side kick. That's kicking me to the side!

Analysis: This line is uttered by the weasel monster complaining about being forced to repeat only two lines and unable to speak freely. The original continuous rhetorical questions intensify the emotions of grievance and discontent, which is a typical emotional colloquial expression. The translator adopts free translation to adjust linguistic logic. For the term “透明人”，instead of literal translation “transparent person”，the translator converts it into “That's kicking me to the side”，accurately expressing the core meaning of “being marginalized” and forming a natural humorous echo with the previously translated line “That's not a side kick” literally. The translated version is concise and smooth, adapting to the fleeting delivery feature of film subtitles. Emotional colloquial language often carries unique linguistic rhythm and logic, and literal translation tends to

be stiff and ambiguous. The flexible treatment of communicative translation can retain the emotional core of characters, bridge linguistic gaps, and enrich the vividness and authenticity of character portrayals.

Example 5

Original: 本来我想要长生不老，结果跟上你就变成了早夭。

Translation: I wanted to be immortal. Now I'm going to be very mortal.

Analysis: The original line expresses self-mockery, helplessness and complaint through sharp contrast. The translator omits redundant information such as “跟上你” in the original text and does not choose the literal correspondence of “早夭”, but reconstructs a concise but impactful expression with the help of the English antonym words “immortal” and “mortal”. The translation takes emotional transmission as the first goal, presenting contrast and humor in a way that meets the understanding habits of overseas audiences, reflecting the effect-oriented and audience-centered characteristics of communicative translation, which not only allows overseas audiences to quickly understand the character mentality, but also meets the requirements of concise and easy-to-understand subtitles, effectively improving the movie-watching experience.

3.3 Analysis on Subtitle Translation of *Nobody* From the Integrated Perspective of Semantic Translation and Communicative Translation

Semantic translation and communicative translation are not opposite relationship, but two complementary strategies. In the translation practice of complex texts, it is often difficult for a single strategy to meet the dual requirements of fidelity and acceptability at the same time. It needs to be flexibly matched according to the context to achieve a balance between cultural transmission and audience understanding.

In the subtitle translation of *Nobody*, a large number of lines have the dual needs of cultural transmission and communication. Translators often use semantic translation to preserve the core cultural connotation and optimize the expression form with communicative translation. The following will analyze the advantages of the two strategies in conjunction through case analysis.

Example 6

Original: 我们乃东土大唐而来，去往西天取经。路过此地，特来化缘。

Translation: We're from the Eastern Kingdom of Tang, going west to fetch the scriptures. We are passing through and humbly seek alms.

Analysis: This line has both the *Journey to the West* story background and the communicative function of asking for help. The translator adopts the strategy of comprehensive application of semantic translation and communicative translation. For the content with Chinese cultural identification such as “东土大唐”, “西天取经” and “化缘”, the translator adopts semantic literal translation to retain the cultural core and story background; for the structure of literary sentences, the translator uses non-finite verbs to integrate scattered sentences, strengthen the logic of sentences, and align with the habit of English expression, make the translation fluent and natural. This treatment method not only protects the cultural characteristics through semantic translation and conveys the core background of the myth of *Journey to the West*, but also improves the readability of the text through communication translation to avoid difficulties in understanding by overseas audiences.

Example 7

Original: 唧唧复唧唧，妈咪妈咪哄，东西南北风，标兵奔北坡。

Translation: Mumbo-jumbo. Do re mi fa. She picks seashells. Peter Piper picked a peck.

Analysis: This line is spoken by the toad monster who pretends to chant scriptures, integrating Chinese tongue twisters and humorous recitations. It does not undertake practical information-conveying purpose and focuses mainly on creating rhythmic beauty and comic effects. The translator retains the meaningless rhythmic characteristics of the original text at the semantic level to restore its unique absurd humor; at the communicative level, the translator introduces English tongue twisters and meaningless syllables by

substitution, making the translation consistent with the original text in rhythm, meter and comic effect, enabling overseas audiences to quickly perceive the character's funny and pretentious state.

Example 8

Original: 如婴儿呢喃之语，夏虫午后之鸣叫，梅花凋谢落地之声。又如帝王上朝洪亮之音，布衣切切之私语。

Translation: As if it is the murmur of an infant. The humming of summer insects at noon. The sound of flower petals wilting and falling to the ground. Simultaneously the roar of an emperor and the whisper of a commoner.

Analysis: This line is the pig monster's philosophical and exaggerated interpretation of the scriptures recited by the toad monster. It integrates Chinese images, has both traditional cultural connotations and literature, and forms a mysterious comedy effect in the context of the film. The translator uses semantic literal translation to restore the picture and connotation of natural and humanistic images such as “婴儿呢喃”，“夏虫鸣叫” and “梅花凋落”；for “洪亮之音” and “切切私语”，the translator follows the principle of communicative translation and compares with the words “roar” and “whisper”，without requiring readers to possess relevant cultural background knowledge. The comprehensive use of two translation strategies can not only accurately convey the connotation of oriental philosophy and aesthetics, but also ensure that the translation is easy to understand, truly realize the effective dissemination of traditional culture across language contexts, and improve the cultural value and overseas communication power of the film.

4. Conclusion

Guided by the theory of Newmark semantic translation and communicative translation, this paper conducts a case analysis of the subtitle translation of the film *Nobody*, and explores the selection of translation strategies and practical effects of the film under different line types. The study found that for cultural-specific nouns and similar contents, translators mainly follow the principle of semantic translation and adopt the method of literal translation to ensure that the original information and cultural connotation are faithfully transmitted; when dealing with oral expression, they follow the principle of communicative translation more, using omission, substitution and other methods to make the translation convenient for public understanding; for sentences with both cultural attributes and communication functions, translators usually combine the two strategies to strike a balance between cultural communication and fluent expression.

Generally speaking, the subtitle translation of *Nobody* is of good quality, flexible and appropriate, which not only fully retains the oriental cultural and artistic characteristics of the film, but also fully fits the acceptance habits of overseas audiences, laying a solid foundation for international communication and vigorously promoting Chinese animation films to a broader international market.

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