

# A Study on the Movie Subtitle Translation of *Dying to Survive* Under Communicative Translation Theory

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The movie *Dying to Survive* received rave reviews from the public after releasing. It is about human morality, struggle against unfair reality, and more importantly, the objective reality of high-priced cancer drugs may resonate with audiences. The international spreading of this movie enables the construction of China's positive image as a responsible government, which intends to relieve the burden of its people. Peter Newmark's communicative translation theory attaches importance to readers' feelings. Compared with the content, it focuses more on the feelings generated by the target language audience, and is in line with the easy understanding of target audience pursued by movie subtitle translation. It is found in this paper that free translation is the major adopted translation method under communicative translation theory. This theory and the four translation methods, namely, literal translation, free translation, addition, omission, and cases selected in this paper have effectively achieved the communicative effect, taking into account the target audience's expression habits and immediate understanding, hoping to provide some personal references for Chinese movie subtitle translation to enhance its influence overseas.

*Keywords:* subtitle translation, communicative translation theory, *Dying to Survive*

## Introduction

Subtitle translation can be treated as a kind of "binary text" translation. The language message provided by the movie subtitle is actually a kind of progressive text, and in the process of movie playback, a bundle of painting surface is a sign of the end of the subtitle under the screen (Wei, 2022). Nowadays, with the increasing exchange of movies among different countries, movie subtitle translation plays an indispensable role in cross-cultural understanding and communication. Meanwhile, how to make the target audience better understand stories taken place in China from movies, enhance the influence of Chinese movies in the future, and achieve the greatest communicative effect on target audience is the primary considerations of translators during the process of movie subtitle translation.

Liu (2012) held that in addition to simple entertainment, a good film can not only enrich the audience's leisure life and relax their mind, but also provide educational significance and arouse awareness and behaviour of the public. *Dying to Survive* is adapted from the real story, reflecting the urgent needs of vulnerable groups, so it is quite meaningful to translate its subtitles. It tells the story of Cheng Yong, the protagonist, who is unable to pay the rent for products, and becomes the exclusive agent of the Indian generic drug "Glenin". Although it is an arduous process, the ending of the movie is that China will list the drug into medical insurance, somewhat easing the additional burden on patients. Therefore, the movie itself, the resonance among audiences carried out

by the objective social status quo of sky-high price of lifesaver, and the effect conveyed through movie subtitle translation to target audiences have certain practical significance to the effort to create a positive and responsible national image.

The theories most frequently involved in the research on movie subtitle translation on HowNet in sequence are relevance theory, Skopos theory, and functional equivalence theory. However, communicative translation theory is not much adopted as in the research of subtitle translation as the aforementioned theories.

This paper intends to answer the following research questions:

1. What translation methods are adopted in the subtitle translation of *Dying to Survive*?
2. Why these methods are adopted and what effects they are proposed to make?

### **Literature Review**

In researches on movie subtitle translation, Jackel (2003) examined assumptions about specific target language audiences made by movie makers and their implications in terms regarding to culture, politics, and economy. On the basis of globalization communication theories, he also explores to what extent can those assumptions play a role both in multimedia translation and in the reception of one movie in various countries. Gutt's relevance theory is also frequently adopted in movie subtitle translation. Gutt (2004) held that the success of communication mainly depends on whether the speaker's intention is perceived by the audience. Besides, optimal relevance refers to the assumption or expectation that the listener has the optimal relevance for every communicative behavior, and can always obtain the maximum contextual effect with minimal cognitive effort (Gutt, 2004).

Although the general mainstream trend is still to analyze and research relevant movie subtitle translation under the guidance of Western translation theories, a few domestic experts and scholars have put forward relevant original concepts and insights, and the general mainstream trend is to analyze and research relevant movie subtitle translation under the guidance of Western translation theories. The well-known domestic experts and scholars in translation research are as follows. Li (2001) explained from the perspective of text translation theory of movie subtitle translation, and points out that since the practice of subtitle translation is subject to certain time and spatial constraints, some reductive strategies in the process of translation are preferred in translating subtitles: such as condensation, reductive paraphrasing, and deletion. Zhang (1998) discussed there are two traits of the language of movies and TV programs, namely, immediacy and popularity, and in addition to that, he also mentions the translation methods in translating puns and cultural factors appearing in movies. His research is one of the few early ones focusing on movie subtitle translation.

Newmark (2001) divided texts into three different types: expressive text, informative text, and vocative text. Among them, the kernel of informative text is to convey information. So, the translation of this type of text should be as concise and clear as possible, and do not have to adhere to the original form so that the translation is difficult or cause ambiguities to the understanding of target readers (Newmark, 2001). Therefore, communicative translation is favoured. Besides, the translation of vocative text calls for paying more attention to the target readers' response, so it is consistent with the purpose and core of Newmark's communicative translation theory and this perspective should be adopted in translation of this type of text. Movie fits the definition of both informative text and vocative text, so communicative translation theory is fit for movie subtitle translation. The main point of communicative translation lies in the function in conveying information and producing effects; thus it can be adopted in movie subtitle translation.

In researches on subtitle translation that adopts communicative translation theory, Xi (2020) suggested that communicative translation theory and movie subtitles share common points and ideas on that they both value the receptors in target language more and try to make the original text more accessible and easily comprehensible for them. Xi (2020) drawn the conclusion from his study in the adoption of communicative translation theory in the translation of idioms and dialects in *Nezha* that communicative translation theory is applicable to solve the translation problems of rich cultural characteristics or the target language audience has difficulties in understanding, which is conducive to their emotional resonance, reflecting the important guiding significance of this theory.

Jeremy Munday summarizes the two translation perspectives proposed by Peter Newmark. Munday (2007) believed that communicative translation can be adopted for many types of texts, mainly including non-literary works, informational texts, and some popular novels. In communicative translation, the translator is endowed and entitled with more freedom and room, which realizes the positive communication between the translator and the target readers. Ailan (2016) put forward that when adopting communicative translation theory to guide movie subtitle translation, the translators must follow and bear in mind the following three criteria: be target-language-oriented; be aesthetic; and be consistent with the content of the film.

### Case Study

Under the guidance of Peter Newmark's communicative translation theory, this paper proposes that in order to achieve the effective communication of semantics, themes, and characters' emotions, four translation methods, namely, literal translation, free translation, addition, and omission, are mainly used in the translation of Chinese-English subtitles in the movie *Dying to Survive*. Therefore, this part consists of enumerating specific examples, clarifying the translation methods adopted, and combining the context and expression habits, with the purpose to analyze whether these translation versions are proper, whether they are in line with communicative translation theory, and whether the communicative effects are achieved.

#### Literal Translation and Its Effect

Literal translation seeks equivalent expressions in two different languages. Each country's culture has its unique charm and remarkable characteristics. Therefore, in order to let the target audience, experience the original foreign culture, literal translation can be used to retain the characteristics of the original language and culture during the process of movie subtitle translation.

Example 1:

Chinese version: “救人一命胜造七级浮屠。”

English version: “There is greater merit in saving one life than in building a seven-tier pagoda.”

This scene takes place when the protagonist, Cheng Yong, asks Pastor Liu to help him with his translation work. Although “七级浮屠” does not belong to the corresponding of simple words, there are similar or consistent expressions in both Chinese and English. Therefore, the translator can translate it properly as long as he has dabbled in or understands this kind of words. In this way, it not only achieves the biggest semantic transmission and communicative effect, but also avoids creating another translation with less effective effect that might cause the target audience to be confused.

Example 2:

Chinese version: “你自己要吃包子的。”

English version: “You yourself asked for Baozi.”

This sentence is found in the scene where the protagonist, Cheng Yong, takes his son to order something to eat. With the development of Chinese culture, more Chinese food and cooking culture has been introduced into many foreign countries and got known by foreigners. The term “包子” is directly translated as “Baozi” according to Chinese Pinyin, which can be accepted by the majority of foreign audiences, rather than using a similar word in English culture as a substitute, or a supplementary explanatory statement after the word. First of all, this is because “Baozi” is an item and food in China. There is not necessarily a similar statement or word from English to be used as a substitute. Secondly, as mentioned in the introduction part, movie subtitle has the characteristics of instantaneity, and the subtitles of movie and television works themselves flash by and have certain requirements on the number of words. It is not desirable or worthwhile to add supplementary explanations accordingly. And one of the most important reasons is that “Baozi” is now actually already known to many people overseas, so the possibility of causing poor communicative effect due to the use of literal translation in this scene has been greatly reduced.

When translating sentences with Chinese characteristics, on the basis of accurately expressing the meaning of the original text, the acceptability of the translation should also be ensured by the target audience. Meanwhile, the elements of the original text containing Chinese culture should be properly retained and interpreted to prevent the phenomenon of cultural loss in the translation process, with the purpose of not only retaining the image of Chinese culture but also not affecting the understanding of the target language audience. Indeed, it can enhance the transmission of Chinese cultural meanings and realize the communication and transmission more effectively between different cultures.

### **Free Translation and Its Effect**

Due to differences in culture and language, some words and expressions cannot be directly translated. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the language habits and ways of expressions of the target language and carry out free translation, so as to facilitate the understanding of audiences of target language. It ought to be cautioned that free translation is not the same as translating offhandedly or not to the point.

Example 3:

Chinese version: “挺仗义的。”

English version: “Like Robin Hood.”

This sentence appears in the scene, where the counterfeit drug dealer Zhang Changlin asked Cheng Yong, the protagonist, for money to escape away, and during this process, Cheng Yong is found to be a loyal person smuggling illegal drugs for chronic leukemia patients at the risk of violating supervision laws. From this example, we can find that “挺仗义的” symbolizes the quality of sacrificing one’s own interests for the sake of other people. The English translation is not “uphold justice”, which is also in equivalence to the semantic meaning in Chinese, but “Like Robin Hood”. That’s because in the translation “Like Robin Hood”, Robin Hood is a legendary figure in English folk tales who is a hero praised for his resourcefulness and punishment of evil, which is quite tantamount to the significance, figure, and characteristics of the protagonist. This translation version enables the audience to understand the character’s image more intuitively, clearly, and accurately, thus achieving the purpose and effect of cross-cultural communication and be close that obtained on readers of the original. This seemingly simple and small change not only enhances the target audience’s understanding and sense of enlightenment, but also greatly enhances the communicative effect. In essence, it is also a reflection of the translator’s high level,

which requires the translator to acquire a lot of relevant knowledge to generate such idea and put it into translation practice.

Example 4:

Chinese version: “仁心妙手普众身，徒留人间万古名。”

English version: “Kind heart and healing hands benefit all living creatures which will be engraved forever in peoples’ mind.”

The phrase appears in the pharmacy owned by the protagonist and the leukemia patient presents him with a pennant, which literally expresses that a good person helps others without expecting anything in return, leaving only his own reputation. But this sentence is also a sarcasm to the society and status quo of the time. According to the needs of the context and plot, the translator ingeniously translated the words “仁心” and “妙手” without strictly following the original words one by one. This sentence occurs in the very beginning of the movie, so the two words “kind” and “healing” actually reflect the core and spirit of the meaning the movie connoted, and also cause no difficulty for foreign audiences to get understood.

Example 5

Chinese version: “少来这一套。”

English version: “Cut it out.”

This is said by the protagonist to his ex-wife. This is the protagonist’s response to his ex-wife’s attempt to persuade him to give up custody of their child by offering him a financial sweetener. If this sentence is translated into other versions by free translation like “It doesn’t work on me”, it can also accurately convey the meaning and content. However, if compared with the present translation version, it can be obviously found that it not only lacks the embodiment of the protagonist’s characteristics, but also is relatively more formalized, and the corresponding communicative effect will be more weakened. As the relationship between the two characters, this sentence should be translated more colloquially. Therefore, the current translation adopts “cut it out”, which is a very common colloquial expression in English countries. It is used to express the meaning of “stop talking, it is useless to me”. With three short words and condensed expression, it is not only shorter than the Chinese sentence, but also very suitable for the target audience’s language expression and understanding habits. The communicative effect is thus also better. Besides, there is one translation version supplemented by the author of this paper. This sentence can also be translated as “knock it off”, which expresses the same meaning of that in the sentence “cut it out”, and also achieve the authentic effects and feelings toward the target audience.

Example 6:

Chinese version: “病急乱投医嘛。”

English version: “A drowning man will clutch at a straw.”

Example 7:

Chinese version: “自投罗网啊。”

English version: “Bite the hook?”

The scene happens when some patients are credulous to the fake medicine sold by illegal merchants at relatively low prices because they are unable to afford the high price of the genuine cancer medicine.

The meaning of these two sentences in Chinese are very appropriate, but it seems difficult to find an equally appropriate expression or saying in English. Therefore, free translation is used here to thoroughly understand the meaning in Chinese and find sentences expressing similar meanings in English. Now, these two translations are

both authentic idiomatic English sayings, so that the translation will not affect the transmission of meaning, but also improve the understanding of the target audience, to achieve the maximum communicative effect.

### **Addition and Its Effect**

Addition refers to the process of supplementing and accurately understanding the original text on the basis of rhetorical and grammatical requirements, so that the original text can be faithfully and smoothly translated into the target language. By adopting addition, the translated version can be more concise in grammar, more sound in rhetoric, more acceptable in logic, clearer in semantic, and more appropriate in culture.

In principle, there are two points for the adoption of addition that should be followed. The first one is to add elements that do not exist in the original text but appear in meaning level according to the context, logical relationship, and writing habits. The other is to add the parts omitted in the original. That is to say, only when the added parts are considered indispensable rather than not essential can they be supplemented.

Example 8:

Chinese version: “你听我解释。”

English version: “Listen, listen to me, I can explain.”

This scene takes place when the protagonist brings back the generic specific medicine from abroad and asks a patient he contacted before to sell it to his fellow patients. However, the patient is reluctant to do so for fear that this illegal behaviour might bring trouble to him, and he said the above words after the protagonist feels quite unhappy.

Through the attitude of both sides and the context, the audience as a native speaker can feel the urgency and necessity of the patient’s explaining to the protagonist, but the target audience may not be able to feel it at the first time. If the sentence is just translated into “listen to my explanation”, it fails to show that the two sides of the conversation are persuading each other, and the necessity cannot be conveyed to the target audience. After adding “listen” for twice, the communicative effect is obviously improved. The target audience can immediately know that the patient’s explanation is to calm down the protagonist, and it is also in line with the colloquial characteristics of the dialogue.

Example 9:

Chinese version: “我自己是病人，我吃过。”

English version: “I’m a patient as well and I’ve tried it in person.”

The patient, surnamed Lv, is selling this generic drug privately to other patients at the hospital. To successfully sell this drug and prove that the generic drug is as good as the genuine one, personal experience is a convincing proof. If it is translated according to literal translation like “I’ve tried it”, it is true that there is no missing in level of meaning. However, this sentence is intended to show trustworthiness; the hidden sense and purpose can be felt in Chinese, but cannot be conveyed and felt if translated like that. Therefore, the current translation version adopts addition, by adding “in person”, which is a further emphasis; it presents the hidden emphasis and persuasive purpose of the sentence directly to the target audience. This makes the target audience feel as native audiences do, meeting with the kernel of communicative translation theory and enhancing the communicative effect.

### **Omission and Its Effect**

A necessary and indispensable word or phrase in the source language may be superfluous, and even a barrier in the expressing and understanding in the target language. Therefore, some irreplaceable words or phrases in

Chinese have no meaning and should be omitted in English. Shakespeare once said in *Hamlet*: Brevity is the soul of wit (Wang, 2012). In a word, omission is also needed in the translation process of movie subtitles.

Example 10:

Chinese version: “你不要走啊，你是男人就不要跑啊。”

English version: “Stop! Be a man. Stop!”

This dialogue happens when a patient named Yellowhair snatches the generic drug and runs away. The protagonist says this sentence in order to make him quickly stop and give him back the medicine, so the speed of speaking is accelerated accordingly in this context. If translated literally like “You can’t run away” or “You shouldn’t go”, the amount of words would be larger, the rhythm would be slower, and the protagonist’s commanding tone would be weakened or even be lost. Therefore, the current translation adopts omission, which further reduces a short sentence to a single word. This not only makes the rhythm more compact and achieves the communicative effect, but also expresses the imperative tone with this single word.

Example 11:

Chinese version: “这是谋财害命啊。”

English version: “That’s murder!”

This scene takes place in the background that illegal merchants take advantage of patients’ eager to seek medicine but being unable to afford the high price of genuine drugs and sell fake anti-cancer drugs to these innocent patients.

The phrase “谋财害命” has its counterpart in English, such as “kill for money”, which is also an authentic expression in the target language, but the communicative translation theory pays more attention to the exact understanding of the target audience. Therefore, from the analysis of the context of this sentence, it can be found that the focus and core of this sentence is the latter half, namely “害命” instead of the former part. For these tragic patients, money is of course a huge burden, but they spend money striving to live, and now the unscrupulous sellers of fake drugs seem to just cheat them out of their money. But the most important thing is that it will seriously delay the treatment of patients, and the risk of death rises sharply, which is tantamount to killing. At the same time, the current translation uses the word “murder”, which further exposes the essence of the illegal merchant’s behaviour, knowing that he should not do so but still do, seemingly cheating money, but in essence intending to commit crime and murder. The omission adopted in this translation accurately summarizes his illegal behaviour with this word, highlighting the main point that is “害命” and directly pointing out the meanings, so that the target audience can immediately resonate.

Conciseness is important to movie subtitle translation because movie subtitles are brief and quickly flashed. Any piece of work, especially movie, needs to be immediately impressive to the target audience, because a quick impression makes a strong one. Meanwhile, brevity is achieved by deleting excess words. So, due to the limited length and characteristics of movie subtitles, as long as the meaning and idea of the version is accurate and clear enough to the target audience, it is a wise choice to make the subtitles brief when needed and is feasible. This principle holds true in movie subtitle translation.

## Conclusions

Newmark’s communicative translation theory is consistent with the characteristics of movie subtitles. Besides, movie falls into the category of both informative text and vocative text, which are oriented towards the target readers. Therefore, this theory can be adopted to guide movie subtitle translation into English.

Translation methods under communicative translation theory are just ways, not boundaries that differ greatly from each other. Under the guidance of communicative translation theory, actually, all the four translation methods analyzed in this paper are desirable and appropriate as long as they are properly used and fit with the meaning, theme, and emotion of the characters to be conveyed. In fact, as long as these translation methods value the understanding and appreciation of the target audience and do not cause ambiguities, then they are good ones and should be adopted.

It is found that free translation is the most frequently adopted and primary translation method under communicative translation theory in this paper; especially when it comes to some colloquial words and allusions, free translation often comes into occurrence. Meanwhile, literal translation is optional when involving some related contents of Chinese culture, ideology, and characters. Besides, addition mainly appears when laying emphasis of characters' mood, expression of emotion, and semantic distinction. In comparison, when the speaker is in a hurry or expressing strong emotions, it is advisable to adopt omission and simplify the expression and use as few words as possible to express the meaning.

This paper is written with the hope of providing some personally shallow references for other subtitle translations of Chinese movies. Admittedly, there are still some deficiencies and limitations of this paper due to the author's limited current academic ability and level; they include: Translation methods involved are not enough, the analysis of examples is relatively not profound or in-depth enough, and the number of examples could be more substantial.

However, despite the deficiencies of this paper, the author has spent time and energy to find out the corresponding cases and make analyzations, hoping that such an excellent and far-reaching Chinese film can be understood by more overseas audiences through appropriate subtitle translation, and contributing to telling a good Chinese story well in the author's own small way. This paper is written with hope that subsequent papers can incorporate more translation methods into the analysis and work together to shape the positive image and narrative system.

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