

From Words to Worlds: Metaphor Translation of *Zootopia* from the Perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the types of metaphor in the animated film *Zootopia* and explore effective translation strategies to promote cross-cultural communication. Employing text analysis and case study methods, this research examines subtitle translation strategies under the framework of functional equivalence theory. The finding reveals that the application of vocabulary equivalence and cultural equivalence can effectively steer the translation of metaphors in *Zootopia*, offering strategic guidance to translators. These strategies enhance the quality of metaphor translation in animated films, fostering greater audience understanding and acceptance of the film, and facilitating cross-cultural communication through animated cinema. This study also provides a useful reference for related research and translation practice.

Keywords: functional equivalence theory, metaphor translation, *Zootopia*, cross-cultural communication

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization, cultural exchange and communication through audiovisual media has become increasingly vital. With their unique charm, animated films have attracted audiences of different ages and cultural backgrounds around the world. Metaphor, as a rich and profound language and cultural phenomenon, has been widely used in animated films to convey complex emotions, social critiques, and cultural nuances. However, metaphor translation faces many challenges due to cultural differences, diverse linguistic structures, which may obscure their original charm and function.

Taking *Zootopia* as an example, this study carries out in-conducting in-depth research on metaphorical translation grounded in the theory of functional equivalence, aiming to explore effective translation strategies and methodologies to improve the quality and effect of metaphor translation of animated films, and promote the diversified integration and dissemination of culture in the global scope.

Guided by the theory of functional equivalence, this study analyzes the metaphors in *Zootopia* from cognitive linguistics, rhetoric, and semantics. By examining metaphors relevant to animal imagery, scene environments, and

cultural societies, aligning them with the characteristics of animation. This approach allows us to uncover the connotations and features of these metaphors, as illustrated by the film *Zootopia*, where metaphors are used to reflect societal issues through an anthropomorphic lens. With the help of the core essence of functional equivalence theory, translation strategies suitable for metaphors in specific cases in *Zootopia*. While existing studies have explored functional equivalence theory and subtitle translation, few have systematically analyzed metaphor translation in animated films. By examining how metaphors in *Zootopia* reflect real-world issues and proposing translation strategies that balance fidelity and adaptability, this research contributes to both translation theory and practice. It offers practical insights for translators working on culturally nuanced films, enhancing cross-cultural communication and audience engagement. Additionally, it provides a framework for future studies on metaphor translation in audiovisual media, promoting the global dissemination of animated narratives.

This study employs text analysis techniques to dissect the movie script, dialogue, textual descriptions within imagery, and the myriad symbolic elements present in the film. In *Zootopia*, a plethora of emblematic and illustrative metaphor cases have been meticulously chosen for an in-depth exploration. These cases encompass a wide range of metaphors that are rooted deeply in animal imagery.

The study includes the following research questions:

- 1) What types of metaphors are employed in *Zootopia*?
- 2) How can functional equivalence theory guide the translation of metaphors in *Zootopia* to ensure both semantic accuracy and cultural relevance for target audiences?
- 3) What translation strategies (e.g., literal translation, cultural annotation, contextual adaptation) are most effective in conveying the metaphorical depth of *Zootopia* while maintaining the film's narrative and stylistic integrity?

This thesis consists four chapters. The first chapter outlines the research background, purpose and significance, problems, methods, and structure of the thesis. The second chapter

introduces the current research achievements in the perspectives of metaphor translation, subtitle translation and Functional Equivalence theory both domestically and internationally. The third elaborates on the adaptive choices of subtitles including metaphors in *Zootopia* based on specific examples under fictional equivalence theory. The fifth chapter presents the conclusions, including applicable translation strategies, research limitations and recommendations for future research.

2. Literature Review

This chapter aims to sort out the current status of domestic and international research on functional equivalence theory, subtitle translation and metaphor translation, and to lay the foundation for an in-depth study of the metaphor translation of *Zootopia* under the functional equivalence theory.

2.1 Current Status of Domestic Research

2.1.1 Research on Functional Equivalence Theory

Domestic research on functional equivalence theory is extensive, providing rich insights into its application in translating different texts. Zhao Bairu and Dong Zhen stated that scientific and technological English translation should be based on functional equivalence theory to reproduce the source text's information and linguistic functions in the target language (2022). By analyzing the vocabulary, syntax and discourse of scientific and technological English, they discussed how to use the theory to achieve accurate and fluent translation to meet the needs of scientific and technological information dissemination, such as choosing equivalent words based on the target language's terminology system when translating scientific and technological vocabulary. Lina Zhang (2021) complemented that strategies such as splitting and restructuring are proposed to guarantee the readability of the translation and the accuracy of information conveyed when translating specialized terminologies. Luna (2021) mentioned in "Exploring the Application of Functional Equivalence Theory in English Translation — Evaluating English-Chinese Translation Skills" that the functional equivalence theory requires translators to pay attention to the effect of the translated text in the target-language readers, which is similar to the effect of the source language in the source-language readers. In English translation

practice, translators should apply the principle flexibly according to the type and purpose of the text.

2.1.2 Research on Subtitle Translation

Domestic scholars study subtitle translation from the perspectives of multimodal contexts and pragmatic differences, providing new perspectives for improving translation quality. Wu Jianguo & Li Yujing (2024) proposed that subtitle translation of film and television should consider the influence of multimodal factors such as image and sound on translation. Taking “My Motherland and I” as an example, they discussed reconstructing the multimodal context through subtitle translation to promote the international dissemination of Chinese film and television culture. Yang Shizhang & Xue Xiwen (2023), in “Research on Film and Television Subtitle Translation under the Perspective of Core Modality Integration”, argued that multiple modalities in film and television interact with each other, and subtitle translation should identify the core modalities and integrate them, to realize the functional equivalence of the translated text. The application strategy of core modality integration in subtitle translation is illustrated through case studies. Wang Jianguo & Dai Yixuan (2023) pointed out that there are pragmatic differences between Chinese and English, and that movie subtitle translation needs to take these differences into account and adopt appropriate strategies to ensure that the pragmatic function of the translated text is consistent with that of the source language.

2.1.3 Research on Metaphorical Translation

Domestic studies on metaphorical translation are carried out from cognitive and corpus perspectives to provide support for translation strategy selection. Feng Cong & Feng Qinghua (2024) studied metaphorical verbs from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, and through comparative analyses of metaphorical verbs in Chinese and English literary works, they explored their conversion rules and strategies in translation to achieve equivalence of meaning and style between the translated text and the source language. Based on the cognitive perspective, Wu Yannan, Zhang Duo & Zhang Xiaohui (2023) in “On Metaphorical Translation Strategies in the Cognitive Perspective” propose metaphorical translation strategies such as substitution, compensation, and direct translation with annotation, in order to help

translators convey metaphorical meanings and cultural connotations, to enable target language readers to obtain similar cognitive experiences. Ye Wenxing (2023) applied the corpus approach to analyze the metaphor of “death” in the translation of *Dream of the red Mansions*, revealing the cognitive path of the translator and providing an objective basis for the study of metaphor translation. Wang Xiangling, Lai Si & Jia Yanfang (2021) compared the performance of post-translation editing between human translators and neural network machine translators on metaphor translation through eye tracking and keylogging technology which provides empirical evidence for the combination of the two.

2.2 Current Status of Foreign Research

2.2.1 Functional Equivalence Theory

Foreign scholars study the functional equivalence theory in the fields of advertisement and cultural terminology to expand its scope of application. Jiang (2023) pointed out in *Advertising Translation in the Perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory* that advertisement translation should be based on the functional equivalence theory to make the translated text achieve the same promotional function as the source language advertisement in the target market. In order to make the translated text achieve the same promotional function as the source language advertisement in the target market, the translator needs to use translation skills according to the target language culture and consumer psychology. In “Translation of Cultural Terms Under the Functional Equivalence Theory”, Chen & Wu (2021) study the translation of cultural terms and think that we should look for the expressions of similar cultural functions in the target language, and through the analysis of examples, they put forward the strategies of direct translation, paraphrase and phonetic translation with annotation. Chinese-English Translation from the Perspective of Chinese-English Compression-A Review of Functional Equivalence Theory points out that Chinese-English translation needs to compress or expand the text according to the linguistic differences in order to realize the functional equivalence (Huang, 2021). Yan (2019) in *English Translation and Intercultural Communication Equivalence Research Based on Functional Translation Theory*. Intercultural Communication Equivalence, which argues that

translation is cultural communication and translators should consider cultural differences and use strategies to promote intercultural communication.

2.2.2 Subtitle Translation

Foreign scholars pay attention to the translation strategies and challenges of cultural items in subtitle translation. In “The art of paper cutting: Strategies and challenges in Chinese to English subtitle translation of cultural items”, Chai, Ong, Amini & Ravindran (2022) take the subtitle translation of films and TV programmers related to the art of paper cutting as an example, and put forward the strategies of direct translation, paraphrase, and annotation, etc., which can help foreign viewers to understand cultural connotation. Saputra & Fatmawati (2022) took subtitle translation of a film with literary themes as an example to summarize techniques such as omission, substitution and reorganization to adapt to the temporal and spatial constraints of subtitle translation. Leksananda & Manus (2023) studied the translation procedures of cultural words in movie subtitles, proposing procedures such as identification, analysis, conversion and verification that ensure that cultural words are accurately conveyed.

2.2.3 Metaphoric Translation

Overseas scholars study metaphoric translation from the perspectives of EFL learners’ translation, metaphoric expression in different language systems, etc. In “Metaphoric proverbs in EFL learners’ translation”, Belkhir (2022) studied the performance of EFL learners in translating metaphoric proverbs and found that their difficulties stemmed from unfamiliarity with the cultural background and limitations in linguistic competence, and proposed to strengthen the teaching of culture and training of translation skills. Yusupova, To’ychieva & Yo’ldasheva (2022) explore the expression of metaphor in different system languages in “Expression of metaphor in different system languages”, revealing the universality and specificity of metaphor and providing a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural perspective for metaphor translation.

To sum up, scholars at home and abroad have made fruitful achievements in functional equivalence theory, subtitle translation and metaphor translation. In the study of functional equivalence theory, there is an in-depth exploration of its application in different text

types; the study of subtitle translation pays attention to the factors of multimodality and cultural differences; and the study of metaphorical translation provides the basis for translation strategies from multiple perspectives. However, there are also shortcomings in the existing studies. In the research on metaphor translation under the theory of functional equivalence, there are fewer systematic researches on specific film and television works, such as *Zootopia*, which is rich in metaphors, and the in-depth research on its metaphor translation needs to be strengthened. In the research on the combination of subtitle translation and metaphor translation, there is not enough in-depth research on the special performance and strategy of metaphor in subtitle translation. Future research can focus on these aspects to improve the study of film and television metaphor translation under the functional equivalence theory.

3. Analysis of Metaphor Types and Translation Strategies in *Zootopia*

3.1 Metaphors Based on Animal Images

3.1.1 Anyone Can Be Anything! (2:59)

Subtitle: 每个动物都有无限可能。

In *Zootopia*, the character of Judy Hopps the rabbit is highly representative. The film uses Judy’s image to convey the metaphorical significance of a small individual breaking through social prejudices and pursuing dreams in society. Rabbits are typically seen as weak animals, and in social stereotypes, they are only capable of simple professions. Judy’s choice to become a police officer symbolizes a challenge to these prejudices, metaphorically representing the film’s core theme of challenging social stereotypes. Like Judy says at the beginning of the film (2:59), “Anyone can be anything!” From the perspective of functional equivalence in terms of semantic equivalence, this can be literally translated as “每个动物都有无限可能” which concisely and accurately conveys the semantic information of the original sentence and aligns with the expression habits of the target language; from the perspective of cultural equivalence, in order to help the audience better understand the cultural metaphor behind this line, that is, Judy’s words are not only an expression of personal dreams but also reflect a challenge to social prejudices, encouraging the audience to pursue equality and freedom, one can combine free translation and provide

supplementary explanations through annotations. This translation strategy achieves functional equivalence, helping the audience understand and appreciate the content of the film just like the original language audience.

3.1.2 "It's Called a Hustle, Sweetheart" (22:55)

Subtitle: 这叫智取, 宝贝儿

In *Zootopia*, Nick the Fox is vividly portrayed. Traditionally viewed as a symbol of cunning, the fox in *Zootopia* embodies Nick's wisdom and cunning. Yet, beneath these traits lies a metaphor for those struggling at society's fringes, confronting injustice and prejudice. For instance, during a pivotal moment in the film, as seen at 22:55, Nick fabricates a deceitful tale to exploit the ice cream shop owner's generosity. When his lie is uncovered, Nick remarks, "It's called a hustle, sweetheart." The word "hustle" within this context, it serves as a metaphor for the "ingenuity" employed by those at the margins to navigate their surroundings, subtly hinting at the societal oppression and injustices they endure.

From the perspective of functional equivalence theory, the subtitle paraphrases it into "这叫智取, 宝贝儿", which accurately conveys the meaning of Nick; from the perspective of style and equivalence, he retains Nick's playful and cunning style; in the aspect of cultural equivalence, the target audience can understand the living state revealed by Nick's behavior, and his unique response to social prejudice, highlighting his struggle to survive in the bottom of society. Through such translation, the audience can deeply understand the dilemma Nick faces in challenging social prejudice, just as the original audience does, thereby recognizing the functional equivalence between the translation and the original text.

3.2 Scenario and Environment Metaphor

3.2.1 "Welcome to Zootopia!" (8:00-12:17)

Subtitle: 欢迎来到动物城

In *Zootopia*, scene and environmental metaphors are important ways for the film to convey social themes. The film implies the social class differentiation and inequality through the careful depiction of different regions. The word 'Zootopia' stems from 'utopia', symbolizing an idealized and perfect society in English culture, encompassing ideals like equality, justice, and freedom. When Judy first arrived in Zootopia, between 8:00 and 12:17, the Sahara Square,

which is a modern, affluent, and thriving business hub, stands out in sharp contrast to Bunnyburrow, which is poor, crowded and lack of resources. This strong contrast is not only visually presented through the visual impact, but also reinforced by means of Judy's feelings and dialogue. The subtitle, 'Welcome to Zootopia!', stands in stark juxtaposition to the image's depiction of the vast disparity between the wealthy and the impoverished, which profoundly reveals the surface idealism of Zootopia, but actually hides the reality of class contradictions. From the perspective of functional equivalence theory, the direct translation, "欢迎来到动物城", accurately conveys the original information, encapsulating cultural equivalence and the social class differentiation depicted in the image, thereby enabling the target language audience to grasp that the city, far from being an ideal utopia, is merely a microcosm of the complex society, but the epitome of the complex society, which is consistent with the original audiences understanding of the gap between ideal and reality in the film to realizing the reciprocal transmission of cultural connotation. Regarding style, the concise translation approach aligns well with the film's frank portrayal of social contradictions, fostering a synergy between dialogue and imagery, bolstering the metaphorical impact, and facilitating audience comprehension of the movie's message regarding social class stratification and inequality.

3.2.2 Rainforest District (45:30-53:20)

Subtitle: 雨林区

In *Zootopia*, the film cleverly employs the segmentation of various natural habitats within the city to symbolize the diversity and intricacies of society, serving as a metaphorical backdrop. During the sequence where Nick and Judy pursue Mayor Yang (45:30-53:20), the frigid polar regions embody indifference and solitude, whereas the sweltering rainforest exemplifies chaos and oppression. This strong contrast of the environment implies the existence of various problems and dilemmas. In the society, as evidenced by the complex and ever-changing environment detailed in social surveys and analyses, the solution to the social problems needs to be found. From the theory of functional equivalence, when translating the name 'Rainforest District' to "雨林区", the author accurately conveys the literal meaning while

retaining the original characteristics; From the perspective of cultural equivalence, this translation aligns with target culture naming conventions, enhancing audience understanding; the style ensures cohesion and consistency throughout the translation, picture and language. To help the audience better understand the metaphor behind it, annotations or narration should be used to reveal the underlying currents of the rainforest and the characteristics of its environment. This will assist the audience in comprehending the social metaphor hidden within the changes in the natural environment, enabling them to more fully grasp the social diversity and administrative hierarchies depicted in the film, thereby achieving functional equivalence between the translation and the original.

3.3 Cultural and Social Metaphors

3.3.1 "Fear Always Works" (恐惧总是有效的) (1:10:15-1:12:20)

In *Zootopia*, cultural and social metaphors are important manifestations of the film's profound connotation. The film cleverly uses the contradiction between herbivores and carnivores as a metaphor for racial discrimination in the real world. The intricate plot has further heightened the underlying tensions within *Zootopia*, creating a sense of urgency and conflict. In the climax of the film (1:10:15-1:12:20), "Fear always works" is a typical example of cultural and social metaphor, which deeply reveals the manipulative role of fear. It works as a tool of control in increasing racial division and distrust. The film portrays herbivores and carnivores as metaphors for the opposition and prejudice existing between certain ethnic groups in real society. The character of the sheep mayor employs fear illusions, while carnivores harbor hostility towards herbivores, thereby undermining social harmony and unity. It underscores how fear and prejudice, wielded by power manipulators, foster social instability and unfair phenomena. Analyzing the translation strategy from the perspective of functional equivalence theory, the line "Fear always works" poses a challenge in conveying its profound metaphorical significance through literal translation alone. At the semantic equivalence level, translating it as "怕了就听话了" can more accurately captures the essence of fear's role in social manipulation, focusing on the core meaning rather than a mere literal translation. From a stylistic equivalence

perspective, the new translation retains the concise style of the original sentence, which is easy for the audience to understand. From the perspective of cultural equivalence, such a translation enables the target language audience to better understand the films critique of racial discrimination and social fragmentation and the cultural connotation of how power can use fear to deepen social injustice.

3.3.2 "I'll Have to Be the First One" (我会是第一个) (3:19-3:43)

In *Zootopia*, Judy, the protagonist has a profound metaphor. At 3:19-3:43, Judy says to her parents, "I'll have to be the first one," which is a typical cultural and social metaphor. From the metaphorical standpoint, Judy, being a rabbit, opted for a police career typically dominated by strong and aggressive animals, thereby breaking free from the conventional occupational constraints imposed on women and weaker animals. She dared to challenge the societal stereotype that rabbits are inherently weak and destined only for menial tasks and low-risk occupations. Her role symbolizes not only women's breakthroughs in gender and occupational barriers within the workplace, but also serves as a powerful metaphor for the pervasive social prejudice and injustice faced by vulnerable groups, inspiring individuals to boldly pursue their dreams and shatter the constraints of tradition.

Analysis the translation strategy from the theory of functional equivalence, if translated directly as "我会是第一个," while it conveys the literal meaning, it insufficiently captures Judy's intense sentiment against stereotypes in terms of semantic equivalence. In order to achieve semantic equivalence, it is translated as "我来开先河!" to accurately convey the deep semantics of Judy challenging social prejudice; from the perspective of style equivalence, the straightforward and powerful tone of the original sentence preserves the brave and resolute character, allowing the target language audience to readily grasp the cultural depth of the film, which shatters gender and occupation barriers. This, in turn, amplifies the metaphor of professional identity within the film, evoking a profound resonance among the audience.

4. Conclusion

In *Zootopia*, three types of metaphors are presented through a variety of translation strategies. Metaphors derived from animal

imagery, exemplified by the dialogues featuring Judy and Nick, predominantly employ literal and idiomatic translations, effectively communicating the essence of the lines and characters, while simultaneously unveiling the underlying cultural metaphor. Scene and environmental metaphors, such as the rendering of various region names, primarily rely on literal translation techniques, translation and annotation, which retain the unity of the picture and language, fit the target cultural habits, and imply the deep metaphorical meaning of the audience. Cultural and social metaphors, such as the translation of lines related to herbivorous and carnivore conflict, use Italian translation to highlight the core ideas, and deeply convey the film's criticism of social problems. However, although these translation strategies have achieved functional equivalence to some extent, they still have shortcomings. For instance, certain metaphor translations may elude some audiences owing to cultural disparities, while annotations, if overly intricate, could hinder the film's fluidity. In the future, in the translation of film metaphor, multimedia means can be further combined, such as dynamic subtitle prompts, film before and after the interpretation of short films, thus aiding viewers in grasping the film's profound metaphorical meanings and enhancing cross-cultural communication efficacy.

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