

Research on Subtitle Translation of Film and Television Works from the Perspective of Cross-Cultural Communication — A Case Study of the Film *Green Book*

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doi:10.56397/JLCS.2025.08.05

Abstract

With the continuous progress of media communication technology, cross-cultural communication develops rapidly. Excellent Western film and television works have been introduced into China. The appreciation of other countries' film and television works is one of the most important ways of cultural exchange between countries, and the subtitle translation of films is also rising. Based on the intercultural communication theory, this paper analyzes the subtitle translation of the American film *Green Book*. From the perspective of domestication and foreignization, this paper explores a suitable method for subtitle translation.

Keywords: cross-cultural communication, subtitle translation, domestication, foreignization, *Green Book*

1. Introduction

With the continuous development of the global economy, exchanges between countries and regions around the world have become increasingly extensive, and films have gradually emerged as a crucial medium for cross-cultural communication. The introduction and exchange of cultures rely on translation, and film subtitle translation holds a significant position in the industry. However, due to constraints in human and material resources, subtitle translation has long failed to receive the attention and in-depth research it deserves from professional translators. How to overcome cultural barriers in the target language and handle cultural

elements in cross-cultural communication has become a core focus of research in the dissemination of Western film and television works.

Since its release, the film *Green Book* has gained immense popularity among audiences worldwide. It not only possesses high ornamental value but also carries substantial cultural significance. Taking *Green Book* as a case study, this paper analyzes the main translation strategies of domestication and foreignization employed in its subtitles. Excellent subtitle translation can accurately convey the information contained in the film, help target-language audiences better understand the

plot, and enable them to obtain a viewing experience that is as close as possible to that of the original-language audiences.

2. Research Background and Research Object

2.1 Research Background

The further development of globalization has deepened cultural exchanges between China and other countries around the world. As carriers of culture, film and television works play a significant role in the prosperity and development of culture. Subtitle translation serves as a bridge for cross-cultural dialogue. Countless foreign-language films have been introduced into the Chinese market and are deeply loved by the public. They have become a channel for cultural exchange between foreign cultures and Chinese culture. Films have gradually evolved into carriers of national culture and national spirit, and an effective means of shaping national images.

However, the quality of subtitle translation directly affects audiences' understanding and appreciation of films. Among the various factors that influence the quality of subtitle translation, cultural differences have attracted widespread attention from researchers. From the perspective of subtitle translation, how to handle culture-loaded words poses a great challenge for most translators. This is because translators need, on the one hand, to eliminate the barriers caused by cultural differences between the source language and the target language to ensure the readability of the target text, and on the other hand, to convey diverse cultures to the target-language audience. Therefore, studying subtitle translation from a cross-cultural perspective is of great significance for further promoting international cultural exchanges.

Cross-cultural Communication refers to the cultural exchange activities between native speakers and non-native speakers, and also denotes any communicative interactions among people who differ in terms of their linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Yuan Xinyu, 2015). To analyze a phenomenon from a cross-cultural perspective means to examine the characteristics of various cultures involved in that phenomenon, thereby promoting the acceptance and adaptation between different cultures (Ye Lei, 2022). When translating film subtitles, due to the influence of cross-cultural factors, translators need to adopt different translation strategies. For instance, domestication and

foreignization are commonly used translation strategies. Proposed by Lawrence Venuti (2012), an American translation theorist, these two strategies manifest not only at the linguistic level but also in the handling of cultural elements.

The domestication strategy requires translators to get as close as possible to target-language readers and adopt expressions familiar to them, while the foreignization strategy operates in the opposite way. In subtitle translation, domestication and foreignization play a vital role—they are interdependent and complementary to each other. Similarly, in film subtitle translation, these two strategies serve as a link for cultural communication. Admittedly, translation methods are flexible and diverse, and translators often employ them in a highly flexible manner during film subtitle translation. Since both domestication and foreignization have their own advantages and disadvantages in translation practice, translators are required to apply them flexibly according to the requirements, purposes of translation and types of data, so as to achieve the unity and balance of these two strategies.

2.2 Research Object

Research on subtitle translation undoubtedly proceeds in tandem with the internationalization of the film and television cultural industry. As an increasing number of foreign film and television works pour into China and gain popularity among Chinese audiences, the necessity of subtitle translation research has become increasingly evident. In China, Qian Shaochang (2000), a renowned translator, pointed out that the language used in film and television contains elements of ordinary language while also possessing its own distinctive features. Different scholars have conducted studies on the various characteristics of subtitle translation. From the author's perspective, subtitle translation exhibits the following features:

(1) Colloquialism: Film and television dramas are primarily plot-driven, with the plot advanced through interactions between characters. For the purpose of entertainment, it is unlikely for obscure, awkward, or overly professional expressions to be used in films. Dialogue serves as the most important and commonly employed form of interaction. Sentences in dialogue are usually not excessively long, preventing audiences from lacking

sufficient time to comprehend the content while viewing the visual scenes of the film or television work.

(2) Vividness: With the improvement of people's living standards, individuals have access to a wider range of entertainment activities and news. Unlike other literary works, films convey characters' personalities, inner worlds, and the plot through a combination of language, music, images, gestures, and other media. All these elements are closely related to the quality and popularity of a film. Therefore, the language used in films should be vivid and engaging, so as to fully convey the plot content and the distinctive traits of the characters.

The film *Green Book* is an American movie released in 2018. It won the Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Supporting Actor, and Best Original Screenplay in 2019. Set in New York in the 20th century, the film tells the story of Tony, who, out of financial necessity, takes a job working for Dr. Shirley—driving and accompanying the pianist Dr. Shirley on a concert tour as they travel south. Beyond depicting a series of events that unfold during their southern journey, the film also portrays the friendship that develops between two individuals from vastly different life circumstances.

Analyzing the linguistic and cultural uniqueness of the film's subtitles from a cross-cultural perspective helps reduce the cultural barriers audiences may encounter while watching the film, thereby achieving the goal of cross-cultural dialogue. This paper explores the difficulties and challenges in subtitle translation, and summarizes the strategies and techniques applied in the subtitle translation of *Green Book* from a cross-cultural standpoint, with the aim of providing valuable insights for the research on subtitle translation between Chinese and foreign films.

3. The Reflect of Cross-Cultural Communication in Subtitle Translation

Translation serves as the cornerstone and primary medium of cross-cultural communication. Against the backdrop of globalization, translation can transcend language barriers, enabling people from diverse cultural backgrounds to understand and communicate with one another. It plays a "bridge" role in various fields such as business exchanges, academic cooperation, and cultural

dissemination. (Guo Ting & Wang Yunjiang, 2025) Cultural translation plays a vital role in enhancing local identity and facilitating cross-cultural understanding (Panornuang Sudasna Na Ayudhya, 2025). Subtitle translation serves as a channel for cultural exchange within the context of cross-cultural communication, and its functions mainly fall into the following two aspects: (1) It can convey more abundant information to audiences, helping them better understand the plot content. (2) It enables deaf-mute people and those with hearing impairments to comprehend the content of the film. Although subtitle translation is a relatively new field, it still cannot be divorced from the constraints of culture in the specific translation process.

For example, in the film *Green Book*, the line "Of course, I don't want you to miss the show, you ungrateful bastard!" is translated as "我当然不想你错过演出,你这个白眼狼!". Instead of being literally translated as "卑鄙小人" (a vile person), the word "bastard" in the original text is replaced by "白眼狼", a term with distinct Chinese cultural characteristics. In Chinese, "白眼狼" refers to an ungrateful person, which is highly consistent with the original meaning of "bastard". However, the term "白眼狼" is more idiomatic and carries unique Chinese linguistic features, taking into account the audience's level of understanding and appreciation.

This translation method is well-aligned with the cognitive habits of Chinese audiences, instantly narrowing the distance between the audience and the film. At the same time, it allows the audience to accurately perceive Tony's feelings of anger mixed with helplessness at that moment, effectively conveying the film's plot and ensuring the plot remains tight and coherent.

4. Research on the Subtitle Translation Strategies of the Film *Green Book* from the Perspective of Cross-Cultural Communication

4.1 Domestication

According to Venuti's view, domestication is "a translation strategy that employs a transparent and fluent style to minimize the sense of strangeness for target readers." Domestication prioritizes readers of the target language, adopting expression methods familiar to them to convey the content of the original text, ensuring that both the content and form of the translation fall within the scope of the readers' cognitive

understanding of the real world (Zhang Chenxiang, 2006). Applying the domestication strategy in subtitle translation can not only effectively help target-language audiences understand the film's plot but also make the audience feel a strong sense of familiarity and affinity.

ST: "I'm just good at talking people into, you know, doing things they don't wanna do. By bullshit them."

TT: "你懂的, 我就是擅长说服别人, 让他们做他们不想做的事。用我的三寸不烂之舌。"

Literally, "By bullshit them" would be translated as "靠哄骗他们". However, "三寸不烂之舌" is a Chinese idiom originating from Records of the Grand Historian: Biography of Lord Pingyuan and Yu. It describes someone who is eloquent and skilled in speech. Instead of translating "By bullshit them" literally, the translator fully took into account the linguistic habits of Chinese audiences and adopted a domestication approach to the original text. This translation not only conforms to the reading habits and cultural preferences of Chinese people, helping them better understand the original meaning, but also perfectly captures the protagonist Tony's carefree and quick-witted personality traits. It also plays a positive role in helping Chinese audiences immerse themselves in the film's context.

ST: "Nice turn Mike, what he makes it up?"

TT: "走得好, 他嚼啥舌根了?"

This line is spoken by Tony. "嚼舌根" is a Northern Chinese dialect term, meaning to spread rumors or talk nonsense. During a rest stop, Tony picked up a stone that had fallen on the ground near a stall; a member of the accompanying band witnessed this and quietly walked over to the car to tell Don, which prompted Tony to say this line. The original meaning of "make up" here is "to fabricate". The translator handled this cleverly by adopting the domestication strategy and translating it as "嚼舌根". This not only conveys Tony's sense of displeasure but also faithfully communicates the original content in an expression familiar to Chinese audiences, narrowing the distance with Chinese viewers while enhancing the readability of the translation.

ST: "Hey, hey fancy-pants, you wanna play."

TT: "靓仔, 你要一起玩吗。"

This line is spoken by a Black local resident to

Dr. Shirley after Tony drops Dr. Shirley off at his accommodation as directed by the *Green Book*. The term "fancy-pants" refers to someone who puts on airs or a man who is overly effeminate. On the other hand, "靓仔" is a Cantonese dialect term, originally meaning "good-looking guy" or "handsome young man"; in current practical use, it is also used to address unfamiliar men in a casual manner. In the context of this film scene, the Black local residents are portrayed as down-to-earth characters. Therefore, translating "fancy-pants" as "靓仔" here is more in line with Chinese expression habits and also makes it easier for target-language readers to understand the context.

4.2 Foreignization

The foreignization strategy in film subtitle translation can not only accurately convey the plot content of the film, but also prompt the audience to receive a cultural edification from a foreign land (Wan Li, 2021).

Foreignization requires respecting the existence of cultural differences, thereby preserving to the greatest extent the linguistic style and cultural characteristics embodied in the source text. To a certain extent, it aims to maintain the original expression of content, allowing the audience to perceive the existence of cultural differences while still successfully grasping the profound meaning within (Li Bo, 2022). Although subtitle translation is subject to numerous constraints—being unable to elaborate on or explain such distinctive cultural elements within limited time and space, and the audience also lacking sufficient time to infer and ponder over the profound meaning—subtitles translated through the foreignization approach can still retain the wonderful artistic conception and cultural uniqueness of the source text to the maximum degree.

ST: "From thy bounty, through Christ our Lord, Amen."

TT: "主啊, 感谢您的慷慨, 阿门。"

This line is spoken during a family dinner at Tony's home. In some Western countries, families often say such a phrase before meals to express gratitude for the food they are about to eat. Guided by the Skopos Theory, the translator adopted the foreignization strategy and translated it as "主啊" (Lord). This translation not only avoids difficulties in audience comprehension but also fits perfectly with the current context, making it highly appropriate. It

not only faithfully renders the original text (thus fulfilling the principle of faithfulness) but also helps Chinese audiences gain an understanding of foreign culture.

ST: “Tony, the first thing I’d like you to do, when we arrive in the city, is check the piano where I’m playing, make sure it’s a Steinway as per my contract.”

TT: “托尼，我们到目的地后，你第一件事就是检查我要去弹的那台钢琴，按照合同规定，必须是斯坦威牌的。”

In the film, Dr. Shirley is a renowned Black pianist with an outstanding pursuit of art, so he only plays the finest pianos. During that era, the best pianos were those of the Steinway brand. Therefore, Dr. Shirley instructs Tony to check whether the piano provided is a Steinway before each performance, as he aims to deliver the most perfect show. Instead of catering to the audience by translating “Steinway” as “a type of piano brand”, the translator adopted the foreignization strategy and rendered “Steinway” into “斯坦威” through transliteration. This translation choice is justified because the context of the sentence already makes it clear that “Steinway” refers to a piano brand, so such a translation does not cause comprehension difficulties for the audience. Furthermore, this foreignized translation also helps to expand the audience’s knowledge.

ST: “Tony: You know, when you first hired me, my wife went out bought one of your records, one about the orphans.

Don: Orphans?

Tony: Yeah. Cover had a bunch of kids sitting around a camp-fire?

Don: Orpheus. Orpheus in the Underworld. It’s based on a French Opera. And those weren’t children on the cover. Those were demon in the bowels of hell.”

TT: “托尼：其实你最开始雇佣我的时候，我老婆买了一张你的关于孤儿的唱片。

唐：孤儿？

托尼：对，封面上有一群小孩坐在篝火边。

唐：那是奥菲斯（发音类似 orphans），《地狱中的奥菲斯》（奥菲斯是希腊神话中阿波罗与缪斯之子、传奇音乐家）根据法国歌剧创作的。而且封面上也不是小孩，都是地狱里的恶魔。”

Tony mistakes “Orpheus” in Don’s work Orpheus in the Underworld for “orphans”—a word similar in pronunciation—which could

lead to unnecessary misunderstandings among the audience. Here, the translator addresses this by explaining the similar pronunciations of “Orpheus” and “orphans” while also providing a brief introduction to the origin of Orpheus. This approach not only converts the content into the target language but also remains faithful to the original text. It enables target-language audiences to understand the culture of the source language, thereby promoting cultural exchange and dissemination.

5. Conclusion

Film subtitle translation is an inevitable demand driven by economic and social development. As a crucial means of artistic and cultural dissemination, subtitle translation must always serve target-language audiences. An excellent translator acts as a bridge between the target language and the audience, and a communicator who facilitates cultural exchanges among countries.

Therefore, in film subtitle translation, the principle of “seeking common ground while reserving differences” should be adhered to. Translators must not only consider the acceptance ability of target-language audiences but also fully convey the linguistic and cultural information contained in the original film. They should align with the characteristics and features of the film work to select subtitle translation strategies that match the film’s character traits and plot.

When translating the original text, the cultural information contained in the source language should be integrated with the translation according to the characteristics of the translated language environment and the audience (Zuo Chunmeng, 2024). An analysis of the subtitle translation of *Green Book* reveals that when translating subtitles for foreign films, the decision to adopt domestication or foreignization depends on specific contexts. When the language used in a film carries unique cultural connotations—for instance, when character dialogues contain cultural terms unfamiliar to the audience, or when certain expressions may be deemed incomprehensible—translators can opt for a strategy that ensures accessibility. In such cases, the domestication strategy is recommended.

For terms with cultural implications appearing in the film, if the goal is to help the audience understand foreign cultures, it is advisable for

translators to adopt the foreignization strategy in practical translation. Employing appropriate domestication or foreignization strategies to convey all linguistic elements of the characters enables the audience to feel a sense of empathy and willingness to accept the content. While explaining cultural contexts, translators can preserve the original cultural characteristics, allowing the audience to find common ground with their own culture and achieve emotional resonance.

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