

# A Brief Analysis of the English-Chinese Subtitling Translation Strategies in *Green Book* from the Perspective of Culture

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## Abstract

As a modern artistic form, film plays an important role in the cultural exchange between China and foreign countries. Subtitling translation is one of the most frequently used devices in film translation. The accuracy and rationality of subtitling translation are essential to cultural comprehension and exchange because of the big differences between English and Chinese. In the process of translating, culture is an important factor to be considered. This paper analyzes the features of subtitling translation, explores the influence of cultural differences on subtitling translation of the films, and demonstrates the subtitling translation strategies applied in the film *Green Book*. The paper aims to give some suggestions about subtitling translation of the films and further promote the exchange of different cultures.

**Keywords:** cultural differences, E-C translation, subtitling translation, *Green Book*

## 1. Introduction

Film, as a kind of popular art, is an art form shown for the common people all over the world. The cultural connotations or the complex emotions expressed in the movie are all shown through the pictures and language on the screen. The audience can understand and grasp the plot of the film in the short time of watching. Therefore, films from different countries should be translated in accordance with the target language and culture, so as to realize the transmission of film art.

The film *Green Book* released in 2018, won “Best

Motion Picture of the Year” of the 91st Academy Awards. It is a feature film directed by Peter Farrelly, starred by Viggo Mortensen and Mahershala Ali. Based on a true story, the film tells a story about friendship between a white driver Tony Lip Vallelonga and a black pianist Don Shirley in their tour from New York all the way south guided by *Green Book*. The story happened in the 1960s America between two different races from separate social classes.

Don Shirley is well-educated and has an amazing talent for music. He lives and works in the upper-class society in the United States. He longs to gain dignity with his talent and wants

to change the prejudice against black people in the world. Tony Lip Vallelonga, a white man, is initially reluctant to work for a black man, but is obliged to become Don's chauffeur and bodyguard for making ends meet. His task is to ensure that Don is able to have his tour concerts in the South. They embarked on a perilous and fascinating journey with *Green Book*. Along the journey, these two people with different skin colors and cultural backgrounds broke down the prejudice against each other, crossed the racial barrier and established a deep friendship.

The film *Green Book* is acknowledged widely in the world, where the subtitling translation of the film plays an essential part. This paper analyzes the E-C translation strategies applied in the film *Green Book* and aims to give advice on subtitling translation, promoting cultural exchange.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Definition of Subtitling Translation

Subtitling translation of a film mainly refers to an explanatory expression of the dialogue among the characters in the film in the form of the target language. It is a particular type of language transformation: a condensed written translation of the original spoken language (Nedergaard-Larsen, 1993).

### 2.2 Classification of Subtitling Translation

Subtitling translation can be categorized into intra-lingual subtitling translation and inter-lingual subtitling translation from the perspective of linguistics. Intra-lingual subtitling translation has no need to transform one language into another, but transforms what is said into the text. Inter-lingual subtitling translation refers to translating a source language into a target language on the condition of preserving the original soundtrack. The so-called subtitling translation usually belongs to the inter-lingual subtitling translation.

### 2.3 Features of Subtitling Translation

Subtitling translation belongs to literary translation, but it also has its own distinctive features, such as audio-visibility, instantaneity, popularity, etc. The most distinctive feature of film subtitles is instantaneity. The presentation time of each line is relatively short, and the subtitles are carried out at the same time with the dialogue of the film characters. Compared with other literary works translation, the translation of film subtitles should not be too complicated and tedious, nor should it be too

logical. Otherwise, it will be difficult for the audience to understand the meaning of the lines in a short time. Therefore, the translation of film subtitles should be as concise as possible. The short and appropriate words should be used to show the characters' lines and emotions, so that the audience can instantly understand the content of the film dialogue.

The translation of subtitles should take many factors into account, such as the language proficiency of audience and the education they have received, and adopt the appropriate translation strategies in order to make audience better appreciate the film. In addition, the relationship between the culture of a source language and that of a target language is especially required to be handled flexibly in subtitling translation. To some extent, the purpose of subtitling translation is to promote the exchange of different cultures and bridge the cultural gap.

## 3. The Influence of Cultural Differences on Subtitling Translation

### 3.1 The Influence on Vocabulary in Subtitling Translation

The usage of each language is closely related to its unique social and cultural background. Many words have same denotations but different connotations under different cultural backgrounds, like in China and western countries. The inconsistency of words with the same concept reflects some cultural differences between Chinese and English. In fact, the differences between Chinese and English in vocabulary are mainly reflected in the sentimental color and connotation of words.

For example, the word "red" represents happiness, auspiciousness and good luck for Chinese people. That's because Chinese people have revered red since the ancient times and they regard red as a noble color. In traditional Chinese weddings, the bride and groom usually wear bright red clothes and the room is always decorated with red characters representing double happiness, which expresses good wishes for the newly married couple. During the Chinese Spring Festival, people post red couplets and the character "fu" on the door, set off red firecrackers, and the elders also give red packets to the younger generation, which all convey people's good expectations for the New Year. In the recent period, red is also a symbol of revolutionary spirit, such as the Red Army,

because red represents the blood of the soldiers who sacrificed their lives for the country. However, in the western, the color red symbolizes bad luck and deficit. Therefore, western people use the phrase “go into the red” to represent deficit or be in debt. In addition, in western Christian culture, the color red also symbolizes evil and death. “Red flags” refers to those irritating things. “Red Brigade” is an underground organization in Italy, which organizes terrorist activities such as murder and kidnapping.

### 3.2 *The Influence on Syntactic Structures in Subtitling Translation*

As is known to all, Chinese belongs to Sino-Tibetan languages, while English belongs to Indo-European languages. There are big differences between the two languages. First of all, Chinese concentrates on Parataxis and English pays attention to Hypotaxis. Chinese more emphasizes the content and meaning, thus usually paying less attention to the form. The understanding of the paratactic language depends on the context, the mindsets of the speaker or the writer and cultural backgrounds, etc. The sentences are usually simple and short sentences. On the contrary, English more emphasizes the form and less focuses on the content. Hypotactic language focuses on tense and morphology and usually uses logical grammatical conjunctions to demonstrate the relationship among sentences or paragraphs. Thus, in English, the sentences are often complex or compound sentences. A complete sentence can include endless subordinate clauses, which usually makes Chinese people feel difficult and confused to understand these long sentences.

Secondly, Chinese are almost implicit and tactful. When Chinese give some important suggestions to others, they usually first state the reason, the purpose and the background, and then draw a conclusion. Therefore, Chinese incline to put the most important part into the ending and the less important content first. While, English is more straightforward and explicit. They are accustomed to putting the most important part first and then illustrate the point specifically. Thus, the beginning usually includes the most important information. In the process of translation, the distinctive features of the two different languages should be considered in order to choose proper translation strategies. Only in this way, the expected effect of the film

would be achieved, like exchanging different cultures or entertaining the public.

Thus, in subtitling translation, the translators should not only focus on the structure and form of language, but also take “cultural transplantation” as a translation principle, so as to achieve the equivalence between language and culture to the largest extent. According to the different scenes and purposes, translators apply proper translation strategies and translation skills. On one hand, the audience can understand and appreciate the film without obstacles. On the other hand, the movie can bring its own artistic effect and play a vital part in cultural exchange.

## 4. Analysis of Subtitling Translation Strategies in *Green Book*

### 4.1 Domestication

American translation theorist Lawrence Venuti (1995) proposed foreignizing method and domesticating method in *The Translators' Invisibility*. He summarized the two strategies as “domestication” and “foreignization”. The former refers to a kind of translation strategy by which the translators try their best to reduce the readers’ strange sense to the foreign language; the latter refers to a kind of the translation strategy by which the translators want to remain some features of foreign language.

Domestication is defined by Lawrence Venuti to “adopt a transparent, fluent style to minimize the strangeness of the foreign text for TL readers as accustomed to fluent translations that invisibly inscribe foreign texts with TL values and provide readers with the narcissistic experience to recognizing their own culture” (Venuti, 1995). By applying domestication strategy in subtitling translation, the translators can help audience familiar with and better understand the foreign culture and sweep away reading barriers when watching the film.

#### Example 1

**ST:**

Don: You were only thinking about yourself back there, because you know if I miss a show, it comes out of your pocket book.

Tony: Of course I don't want you to miss a show, *you ungrateful bastard*.

**TT:**

唐: 你那么做纯属为了自己, 因为你的小本子上不允许我错过演出。

托尼：我当然不希望你错过演出，你这个白眼儿狼。  
Don strayed into a whites-only bar, and was arrested as a gay. Hearing the news, Tony wanted to rescue Don. But they cannot beat the police. In order not to let Don miss the show, Tony successfully rescued Don by giving a bribe to the police. Don didn't understand why Tony did that, so he argued with Tony. Tony felt misunderstood and spoke out "you ungrateful bastard". If it is translated literally, it will be translated into "不懂感激的混蛋", which is difficult for the audience to understand the exact meaning that Tony wanted to express. Therefore, it is translated into "白眼儿狼" by applying domestication. In Chinese, "白眼儿狼" refers to a person who is ungrateful or bites the hand that feeds one. Here, Chinese audience can better understand the meaning of this sentence and feel Tony's anger and frustration at that moment.

#### Example 2

**ST:**

Don: If you'd like, I'd happily buy you the stone.

Tony: Don't bother. *You took all the fun out of it.*

**TT:**

唐：如果你喜欢，我可以买来送你。

托尼：免了吧。我的乐子都被你搅黄了。

Tony picked up a memorial stone as he walked past a gift store. Don asked Tony to return the stone. Tony thought that the stone is picked up, not stolen, so he didn't want to return the stone. After an argument, Tony had no choice but to get out of the car and put the stone back. "Took all the fun out of it" can be translated literally into "把所有的乐趣都带走；令人扫兴". Here, it is translated into "搅黄", which means that a thing fails or a plan does not work out. Chinese audience are more familiar with the words "搅黄" and can better know about the characteristics of Tony.

#### Example 3

**ST:**

Tony: Wait a minute. *You're full of shit!* You never heard of Chubby Checker?

**TT:**

托尼：慢着。你扯淡吧。你没听说过恰比·却克？

"扯淡" is a classic word in Chinese folk culture, which means talking nonsense randomly. In the film, Tony is illiterate, and his language is very vulgar. Here, "You're full of shit" is translated into "你扯淡吧" by domestication, which not

only correctly conveys the meaning of the original text, but also makes the subtitles more readable. The image of Tony is fully demonstrated by his words.

#### 4.2 Annotation

Annotation mainly refers to that explanatory notes are attached to the original text in the translation process. The length of the notes is not limited. Either in-text notes or footnotes can be used, or both can be used. The translator can add relevant information through annotation, so as to narrow the cultural gap and enable the target language audience to understand the original text more deeply.

#### Example 4

**ST:**

The policeman: He can't be out here at night. This is a sundown town.

**TT:**

警察：【种族隔离时期，某些美国城市不允许黑人日落后在当地逗留】他晚上不能出现在这里……这里是日落镇。

At dusk, Tony drove the car with Don and was pulled over by a local policeman who said the above sentences. If "this is a sundown town" is simply translated into "这里是日落镇", the target language audience would not know what is said. Therefore, the translation strategy of annotation is used, adding the background information: the sundown town refers to the place where the black people are not allowed to stay. The audience would not question "sundown town" when watching the film and learn more about the racial discrimination.

#### Example 5

**ST:**

Tony: Yeah. Cover had a bunch of kids sitting around a campfire?

Don: Orpheus. *Orpheus in the Underworld*. It's based on a French Opera.

**TT:**

托尼：没错。封面是孩子坐在篝火旁？

唐：那是俄尔甫斯。【俄尔甫斯是希腊神话中太阳神阿波罗与缪斯女神卡利俄珀之子、传奇音乐家】《地狱中的俄耳甫斯》根据法国歌剧创作。

In ancient Greek mythology, Orpheus is the son of Apollo and Calliope. Such a background endowed him with extraordinary artistic talent. He made outstanding achievements with his talent of music. Chinese audience are usually

not familiar with ancient Greek mythology. If no explanation is given, the audience would be confused about the person and the opera named *Orpheus in the Underworld*. Here, the subtitling translation helps the audience overcome the difficulties of understanding and sweep away the reading barriers.

#### 4.3 Field Equivalence

Field refers to the activities or events that communicators are engaged in. It includes a great number of factors including language activities and topics of the activities. The nature and scope of discourse is restricted by field. Besides, field influences the choice of vocabulary and voice. The field in subtitling translation refers to the topic that the characters talk about in the dialogue. The field in the subtitling translation of English films should be based on the topic of the source language. The translation must achieve the equivalence of field.

#### Example 6

**ST:**

Don: The profanity is another issue.

Tony: *Why you breaking my balls?*

**TT:**

唐: 你的语言太粗鲁了。

托尼: *你想跟我过不去吗?*

Don persuaded Tony to behave well and avoid talking dirty, but Tony still followed his own inclinations. Hearing Don's words, Tony felt irritated and impatient. Against the context, the sentence "why you breaking my balls?" cannot be translated literally into "打碎我的球". Here it means "why do you always find faults with me?". The field of Chinese translation "你想跟我过不去吗" is equal to that of the source language so that it would be understandable to audience.

#### Example 7

**ST:**

Tony's brother: He had a great job at the sanitation department. You shouldn't have punched out the foreman.

Tony: He shouldn't have woken me up.

Tony's brother: *That's Tony.*

**TT:**

托尼的兄弟: 他原先在环卫局的差事多好。你不该打那个领班。

托尼: 是他不该叫醒我。

托尼的兄弟: *确实是你的作风。*

Tony's family was having a dinner. Tony must look for a new job because the workplace he had worked was closed for renovating. Tony's brother believed losing the job in the sanitation department was pitiful. Tony gave an excuse for that, which can be attributed to his disposition in fact. Here, "that's Tony" cannot be considered as the literal meaning. Tony's brother is very familiar with Tony's characteristics. It means "it's typical of Tony to do this" instead, which is equal to "确实是你的作风" in Chinese, achieving field equivalence between source language and target language.

#### 5. Conclusion

Film, as one of the important means of culture exchange, is inevitably related to a cross-cultural study. Under different social environments and cultural backgrounds, each language in the films would contain different meanings and achieve different artistic effects. Good subtitling translation would make audience better appreciate the film itself and fully immersed in the film. From the perspective of culture between China and western countries, the translation strategies in the film *Green Book* like domestication, annotation and field equivalence are summarized in this paper. Cultural differences should be handled flexibly in subtitling translation. Translators should focus on the cultural differences between the source language and the target language to help promote the exchange of different cultures.

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