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A Study on Chinese-English Film Subtitle Translation Based on the CEA Framework: Taking the Subtitle Translation of *Nezha 2* as an Example

Qingtong Liu, Zhaobing Li

Liaocheng University, Liaocheng 252000

Abstract: As a film rich in traditional Chinese cultural elements, *Ne Zha 2* has achieved remarkable success in the international film market, topping the global box office chart for animated films. Its international acclaim owes much to its meticulously crafted subtitle translations. Based on Li Changshuan's CEA (Comprehension, Expression, Adaptation) translation framework, this paper examines the subtitle translation strategies in the Chinese-English subtitling of *Ne Zha 2*, aiming to offer insights for related subtitle translation practices.

Keywords: CEA framework; *Nezha2*; Film Subtitle translation

Introduction

Ne Zha 2 premiered in mainland China on January 29, 2025, followed by releases in North America on February 14, and across 37 European countries and regions on March 10. On February 6, 2025, the film topped China's all-time box office chart, becoming the first film in Chinese cinematic history to surpass the 10-billion-yuan mark and breaking dozens of national box office records. By March 29, 2025, its global box office had exceeded 15.4 billion yuan, claiming the top spot on the global animation box office ranking. The film has achieved tremendous success both domestically and internationally, exerting a profound impact on cultural dissemination. *Nezha 2* deconstructs and reconstructs traditional Chinese culture. Its scene designs and character modeling incorporate numerous traditional Chinese elements. The film's successful foray into the international market owes much to its meticulously crafted subtitle translations. These translations serve as a bridge, allowing overseas audiences to appreciate the allure of this Chinese mythological tale. Given the abundance of traditional Chinese cultural elements in the film, some concepts are entirely unfamiliar to overseas viewers. How, then, can audiences from different cultural backgrounds grasp the charm of traditional Chinese culture? The answer lies in subtitle translations, which employ ingenious strategies worthy of separate study. While existing research on film subtitle translation often focuses on functional equivalence or Skopos theory, few studies adopt the CEA (Comprehension, Expression, and Adaptation) framework. This paper will comprehensively analyze the translation strategies employed in the subtitling of *Nezha 2* based on Professor Li Changshuan's CEA translation framework.

1. Introduction to the CEA Translation Framework

Based on his teaching experience, Professor Li Changshuan of Beijing Foreign Studies University has developed a translation education theory centered on Comprehension, Expression, and Adaptation. He guides his students to articulate their understanding and insights into translation from these three perspectives, forming a balanced descriptive framework for translation known as the CEA Framework. These three aspects—Comprehension, Expression, and Adaptation—have been widely addressed by theorists across different eras and cultures. Using these three dimensions as key focal points facilitates a comprehensive review of issues encountered during the translation process.

2. Case Analysis

This section will employ the CEA translation framework to analyze the translation strategies used in the subtitles of the film *Nezha 2*.

2.1 Comprehension

Regarding comprehension, the translator must not only understand the content of the original text but also grasp its linguistic characteristics. The translator's understanding of the text must be thorough and meticulous, to the extent that it should equal or even surpass that of the original author. This includes comprehending all concepts, sentence structures and meanings, as well as the relationships between sentences and paragraphs. At the same time, familiarity with the writing background of the original text and expertise in the subject matter are crucial to the translator's understanding (Li Changshuan, 2020: 8). Ye Zinan (2013) noted in his *Advanced English-Chinese Translation Theory and*

Practice: In layman's terms, analyzing the source text is primarily about figuring out what the original text means. This sounds easier said than done, as the "meaning" is quite elusive.

Source Text: 因为我们都年轻, 不知天高地厚。

Translation: Because we are both too young. Too young to fear.

Analysis: In the Chinese context, the phrase "天高地厚" carries a derogatory connotation, often used to mock those who are arrogant or overconfident. When interpreting this four-character idiom, it is essential to closely consider the film's narrative background. Here, "不知天高地厚" is intended to convey Nezha's fearless and heroic spirit. If the phrase were interpreted as "arrogance" and translated literally into expressions such as "have an exaggerated opinion of our abilities," it would fail to capture the portrayal of Nezha's courage and passion in the film. The translation "Too young to fear," however, successfully conveys the core meaning of the idiom within the target language, reflecting the translator's deep understanding of the phrase based on the story's context. This example clearly demonstrates that when dealing with culturally specific expressions, translators must be sensitive to contextual nuances, penetrate beyond the surface meaning to grasp the deeper narrative intent, and ultimately construct a translation that accurately conveys the source culture's distinctive traits while remaining accessible to target language audiences.

Source Text: 混天绫

Translation: Red Armillary Sash

Analysis: The term "混天绫" comprises three elements: "混"(hùn), "天"(tiān), and "绫"(líng). Here, "混天" does not describe a state of celestial chaos but rather conveys the weapon's power to "stir the heavens and earth." Meanwhile, "绫" refers to a lightweight silk fabric, indicating the material of the object. By borrowing the word "Armillary" from "Armillary Sphere," the translator evokes associations with celestial and cosmic concepts for the target audience, precisely conveying the weapon's function of agitating the heavens. The term "Sash," meaning a decorative ribbon or band, accurately captures the form and wearing style of "绫" as a long, strip-like textile. In many artistic depictions, the "混天绫" is portrayed as red—a key and widely recognized visual attribute. The addition of the color word "red" here makes the image of the "混天绫" more vivid and concrete. The success of the translation "Red Armillary Sash" is entirely rooted in the translator's profound understanding of the source text, encompassing not only the function of the "混天绫" but also its material and color. This demonstrates that accurate comprehension is the unshakable foundation of any successful translation, determining the heights the translated work can achieve.

2.2 Expression

Li Changshuan (2020) posits that expression involves faithfully conveying the original meaning and the author's intent—both in content and form—using language that aligns with the reading habits of the target audience. In terms of content, only the ideas explicitly expressed, intended to be expressed, or ought to have been expressed by the author should be conveyed; the translator must refrain from adding personal interpretations or distorting the original meaning. Regarding form, the translation should conform to linguistic conventions, including word choice, collocation, sentence structure, coherence devices, and information flow. It must adhere to general writing norms while maintaining a language style close to that of the original text. "Only when what is understood is expressed can the task of translation be considered accomplished. Therefore, expression power is as fundamental a skill as comprehension in translation." (Liu Miqing 2006: 32)

Source Text: 我命由我不由天!

Translation: I'm the master of my fate!

Analysis: In Chinese, "天" (tiān) serves as a core cultural symbol, representing not only the natural sky but also concepts such as fate, destiny, and even all forms of irresistible external authority. A literal translation, such as "My life is up to me, not up to Heaven," may convey the basic meaning, but the term "Heaven" in Western culture is often associated with God or divine will, failing to capture the broader conceptual nuances of "天" in Chinese. Moreover, such a rendering would sound rigid in English and lack the resolute force and grandeur of the original expression. The translator broke free from the constraints of the specific cultural symbol "天" and directly addressed the core spiritual essence of the phrase—the declaration of "sovereignty over one's own fate." By borrowing the iconic line "I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul" from the British poet William Ernest Henley's famous poem *Invictus*, the translation "I'm the master of my fate" evokes profound cultural resonance and emotional power in the English-speaking world. It immediately calls to mind ideals of resilience, defiance, and self-determination in the target audience. While the translation abandons the literal meaning of "天," it precisely captures and even amplifies the emotional and thematic essence of the original. It conveys an unwavering sense of autonomy and a spirit of rebellion. Compared to an explanatory translation, this version is more concise, powerful, and brimming with heroic confidence.

2.3 Adaptation

Adaptation refers to the editorial processing of the source text when complete equivalence (i.e., word-for-word or sentence-for-sentence

translation) is unattainable or when such equivalence would hinder the achievement of the translation's purpose. This approach ensures the effective conveyance of the original message or better fulfills the translation's objectives (Li Changshuan, 2020).

Source Text: 臭讲究。

Translation: Pain in the ass!

Analysis: The literal meaning of "臭讲究" is "disgusting or excessive fastidiousness." A word-for-word translation such as "disgusting particularity" would not only fail to convey the intended emotional nuance to the target reader but could also cause confusion due to the unnatural combination of words. Such a rendering would entirely fail to evoke a corresponding emotional response in readers within an English-speaking cultural context.

Here, the translator adopted a combined strategy of "reformulation" and "omission." The translation completely abandons the description of the other party's "fastidiousness" as a trait and instead directly shifts to the speaker's subjective feeling. "Pain in the ass!" is an extremely common and highly expressive slang phrase in English, specifically used to convey that something or someone is "extremely annoying or irritating."

This shift moves the focus of criticism from the other person's "behavioral trait" to the "emotional impact" that behavior has on "me." The translator judged that, in this context, conveying an equivalent intensity of annoyance was far more important than accurately describing the act of being "fastidious." The register and emotional impact carried by "Pain in the ass!" in spoken English closely match the effect of "臭讲究" in Chinese. This translation thus achieves functional equivalence through pragmatic adaptation.

3. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the subtitle translation strategies in the film *Ne Zha 2* through the CEA framework. The study demonstrates that when translating film subtitles, translators need to consider deeply the three stages of the translation process: comprehension, expression, and adaptation.

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