

# *A Study on Film Subtitle Translation from the Perspective of Skopos Theory: A Case Study of Kung Fu Panda*

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**Abstract:** As one of the most popular forms of communication, film plays a pivotal role in the cross-cultural communication between different countries. More and more English films and TV productions are entering China, which has become the main way for us to learn English and culture. Therefore, the translation of film subtitles has been paid more and more attention by translators and audiences. This thesis takes animated film *Kung Fu Panda* as an example to make an in-depth study of the subtitle translation of English films from the perspective of Skopos Theory. This thesis focuses on the combination of theory and translation practice, aiming to explore the positive guiding role of Skopos Theory in film subtitle translation and to provide new reference for English film subtitle translation by broadening the research perspective.

## 1. Introduction

In the context of the rapid development of global integration, cultural exchanges between countries have become more frequent, and a great many foreign films and television works have entered China. However, due to the language and cultural differences between China and the West, Chinese viewers may not be able to enjoy foreign movies very well. Therefore, subtitle translation of foreign film and television works is particularly important and it's necessary to conduct an in-depth research on it.

The Skopos Theory differs from the traditional theory of translation, and it requires the translator to proceed from the Skopos. All translation principles and strategies serve the purpose of translation according to Skopos Theory. TV series and movies are literary products with a strong purpose, and each of them expresses different feelings, which requires the subtitle translator to have a clear purpose when translating. They need to know what feelings to express, what images to portray in the movie, and what topics the moviemaker wants to reveal. Consequently, Skopos Theory is one of the most effective guiding ideas for subtitle translation.

As an animated film produced by Dreamworks with strong Chinese characteristics, *Kung Fu Panda* has received a great response and unanimous praise in China. It's not only popular among children, but also attracts many adults to watch it, in large part because the subtitle translation of this film has laid a very good foundation for the promotion of it. Under the guidance of Skopos

Theory, this paper takes *Kung Fu Panda* as a case and analyzed the proper translation strategies applied in translating this film. This study intends to discuss the aspects that need to be paid attention to in the translation of English movie subtitles, as well as the translation strategies that translators can adopt under the guidance of Skopos Theory. And the main purpose of this paper is to explore the applicability and positive guiding meaning of Skopos Theory for film subtitle translation.

## 2. Introduction to Subtitle Translation

As a special translation field, subtitle translation can not only provide non-native English speakers with opportunities to watch foreign movies, but also facilitate English learners to learn English and promote cultural exchanges. Therefore, it is of great significance to study subtitle translation. This chapter will focus on the definition, features, constraints and previous studies of subtitle translation.

### 2.1. Definition of Subtitle Translation

Subtitling is a type of translation in which the original language of a film or TV plays is translated into the target language, usually with text showing the information, both audio and non-audio, in a movie or TV show to help the audience understand the plot.

The definition of subtitle translation has not yet been unified until now, and many scholars have their own insights. Luyken pointed out that subtitles display and vanish to conform to time with the corresponding sentences or expressions of the original conversation and are often attached to moving pictures at a later time as a post produced action.<sup>[1]</sup> In Gottlieb's opinion, subtitling is a written, additive, immediate, synchronous and multimedia translation.<sup>[2]</sup>

### 2.2. Features of Subtitle Translation

Subtitle translation is an art combining sound and picture, which is different from the literary genre that simply appears in the form of words, so it has become a special field of literary translation.<sup>[3]</sup> According to the translator Qian Shaochang, apart from the general components of literary language, audio-visual translation also has the unique characteristics of audibility, comprehensiveness, immediacy, popularity and non-commentary.<sup>[4]</sup> This paper summarizes the features of film subtitle translation as follows:

#### 2.2.1. Instantaneity

Text translation expresses the inner activities of characters through words, and readers can read them repeatedly. While Subtitle translation changes with the content and pace of the film, stays on the screen for a short time, and cannot be repeatedly flipped back and forth. This feature adds difficulty to the translation of subtitles, which must be smooth and concise, and enable the audience to understand the plot information in a short time.

#### 2.2.2. Popularity

Film is an art form for the general public, so it's important to focus on its simplicity for the masses.<sup>[5]</sup> As a realistic portrayal of everyday life, most of the language lines in the film are easy to understand, simple and fluent. If the film subtitles are too obscure, it will not only adds difficulty to the audience to comprehend the scenario of the movie, but also bring negative impact to the box office. Therefore, film subtitle translation must be catchy, simple and clear.

### 2.2.3. No notes

In literature and other written translations, where the reader is likely to have difficulty reading, the translator can explain by adding notes. However, due to the limitation of space and time, the translator is not allowed to add narration in subtitle translation. So the translator must use short language to accurately express the ideas that the original work is intended to convey.

### 2.2.4. Cross-culture

Film subtitle translation is a cross-cultural communication activity. Different languages represent the way of thinking and language expression of different nations. Therefore, in subtitle translation, we must pay attention to the role of cultural exchange, and take into account the language and cultural habits of the source language and the target language.<sup>[6]</sup>

## 2.3. Constraints of Subtitle Translation

Subtitling is a special type of language conversion, and as a special branch in the field of translation, it is affected by various constraints such as time, space and cultural differences.

First, time constraints. Different from the text in literary works, the subtitles on the film or TV screen must be synchronized with the film and television images and sound. Subtitles are usually on screen for only two or three seconds, which requires the translator to inform the audience about the film's plot in a limited amount of time. When translating, the translator must take into account the audience's feelings and acceptance level, and should not use overly complex linguistic structures or ambiguous wording, but should aim for simple and easily understandable expressions.

Second, space constraints. Subtitles usually appear at the bottom of the screen, and because space is limited, translators must translate subtitles into the most concise and clear language to guarantee that watchers get the maximum message in the shortest time.

Third is the cultural difference. Subtitle translation converts a source language into a target language, which is a kind of cultural communication across different countries and regions. And due to the different cultural backgrounds and ways of thinking in different countries and regions, audiences may misunderstand the plot of the movie during the viewing process, thus affecting their viewing experience. Therefore, when dealing with the original text, translators need to use such translation methods as domestication and free translation to avoid comprehension obstacles to the audience.

## 3. Skopos Theory

In the 1950s and the 1960s, the western translation theories focused on the linguistic aspects of translation, such as the "dynamic equivalence" proposed by Eugene Nida. Some scholars gradually considered that it is not enough to study translation theories in traditional linguistic equivalence-based perspective and started shifting to a functional approach. Therefore, the Skopos Theory comes into being.

### 3.1. Brief Introduction to Skopos Theory

Before the 1970s, equivalence theory played a dominant role in the field of traditional translation studies. However, in many cases, the equivalence theory is also difficult to realize and has many shortcomings, which requires a new translation theory to guide translation practice. Therefore, the German functionalism comes into being in this context, which studies translation from a new perspective. It rejects the constraints of "formal equivalence" in language and studies translation

from a new perspective. Before long, Hans Vermeer put forward Skopos Theory, which is the fundamental theory for German functionalism.

In 1989, Vermeer defined Skopos Theory specifically in his article *Skopos and Commission in Translational Action* that translation can be regarded as a purposeful human action that takes place in a given situation. And the word skopos is a specialized designation for the goal of a translation.<sup>[7]</sup>

On the basis of Skopos Theory, the final form of translation depends to a great extent on the function or purpose in the target language context. Additionally, the Skopos Theory also involves three basic rules for translation: the skopos rule, the coherence rule and the fidelity rule, the top ranking of which is the skopos rule,<sup>[8]</sup> holding that the purpose of translation determines the translation methods.

### 3.2. Three Basic Rules of Skopos Theory

Skopos Theory involves three rules: skopos rule, coherence rule and fidelity rule. And translation can be carried out in accordance with these three rules. The next is an presentation to the three rules of Skopos Theory.

#### 3.2.1. The Skopos Rule

In light of the Skopos Theory, the leading rule of all translation activities is the “skopos rule”, which means that the translation should function in the context and culture of the target language and meet the expectations of the target readers. The purpose of translation determines the choice of translation methods and strategies, which is the end justifies the means.<sup>[9]</sup>

Christiane Nord put forward that there are three purposes in the course of translation: the universal purpose of the translators (e.g. translation for livelihood), the presentation of the target text to the audience (e.g. providing message to the reader), and the purpose governed by a translation strategy or procedure (e.g. translating freely to enable the target language readers to better understand the meaning of the original).<sup>[9]</sup> However, “purpose” usually touches on the informative purpose of the translation. In other words, the translation has the function of communicating with the target reader in the socio-cultural context of the object language. Therefore, the translator ought to define the particular aim in the specific translation circumstances and select which translation method to apply based on this goal. In this paper, the author studies the subtitle translation of the English film *Frozen* primarily based on this skopos rule.

#### 3.2.2. The Coherence Rule

In Vermeer’s opinion, the coherence rule, also known as “infra-textual coherence”, refers that the text should be comprehensible to receivers in target language culture and be coherent with the communicative situation in which the target text is to be used.<sup>[10]</sup> That is to say, the way in which the translator translates the original text must be consistent with what the recipient can accept and understand under the circumstances of his own knowledge and cultural background.

#### 3.2.3. The Fidelity Rule

The fidelity rule, Vermeer also calls it “inter-textual coherence”, requires that the target text should “show a certain degree of connection with the corresponding source text”.<sup>[9]</sup> In other words, whether in form or in function, the target text must be consistent with the original one, that is, faithful to the original text. But the degree of fidelity is various, which is caused by different purposes of translation.

These three basic rules can provide guidance for specific translation practices, but in terms of

their manipulative power, their importance is necessarily uneven. Skopos rule is the core principle among them and occupies the most important position. As Nord said, if the purpose requires a function change, the standard is no longer the consistency with the context of the original text, but the adequacy or appropriateness in relation to the purpose. In addition, if the purpose needs to be inconsistent in context, the standard of intro-textual coherence is no longer valid.

### 3.3. Feasibility of Skopos Theory to Film Subtitle Translation

Due to the characteristics and constraints of subtitle translation, it is necessary to carry out subtitle translation under the guidance of an appropriate translation theory.

Subtitle translation is a purposeful activity. The basic purpose of subtitle translation is to provide audience in a specific cultural background with the most relevant information in the most effective way to help them better understand and enjoy foreign films.

The purposiveness of subtitle translation explains its necessity to be guided by Skopos Theory. Skopos Theory takes into account the cultural background, reading expectations and communicative needs of the recipients, and determines the translator's translation strategy according to the intended purpose of the translation. Therefore, in order to realize the aim of subtitle translation effectively, the translator ought to translate the film and television productions under the guidance of Skopos Theory, and flexibly use translation strategies to convey the essence of source text to make the audience understand the film better and be interested in it.

## 4. A Case Study of *Kung Fu Panda* From the Perspective of Skopos Theory

Skopos Theory is of great significance to translation and provides translators with a fresh perspective on translation. This chapter will give a brief introduction to *Kung Fu Panda* and the strategies adopted in the film translation will be illustrated from the perspective of Skopos Theory.

### 4.1. Brief Introduction to *Kung Fu Panda*

*Kung Fu Panda* is an American computer-animated comedy film released in 2008 produced by Dreamworks. *Kung Fu Panda* is an American action comedy film featuring Chinese Kung Fu, set in ancient China, with Chinese elements in its landscapes, sets, costumes and food. The story is about a clumsy panda who aspires to become a kung fu master.

In 2008, the film won "Annie Award"-the "Oscar" in animation field with ten awards. It has also enjoyed high popularity in China as it was the first animation film making more than 100,000,000 RMB in Chinese box office and it won the 13th "Huabiao Award" as the outstanding dubbed film and "Meihou Award"-the highest award for cartoon and animation in China as the best foreign animation film. And apart from the wonderful cinematography and the intriguing plot, the great success of the film is also largely attributed to its excellent and appropriate subtitle translation. Therefore, in the process of subtitle translation, translators should pay attention to the use of some translation methods to improve the quality of film subtitle translation, so as to attract more audiences and better promote the dissemination and communication of different cultures.

### 4.2. Strategies Used in Subtitle Translation of *Kung Fu Panda* from the perspective of Skopos Theory

In the following part, some lines in *Kung Fu Panda* will be selected to analyse the different translation strategies adopted by the translator and explain why these translation strategies are consistent with the Skopos Theory.

### 4.2.1. Domestication

In the process of subtitle translation, it is very important to convey the information of the original text and at the same time compile the target language text which conforms to the cultural background of the target audience. That is to say, although the setting and style of the original works largely depend on the original language, it is necessary to properly “localize” or “domesticate” the subtitles in order to make the utterance more natural to the target audience<sup>[11]</sup>

Domestication refers to a transparent and smooth translation strategy adopted by the translator from the perspective of the target language in order to minimize the ‘foreignness’ in the foreign language text.<sup>[11]</sup> Focusing on the target language, domesticated translation pursues that the translated text conforms to the target language and cultural norms, so as to better meet the concise and clear reading needs of the target readers.

In the subtitle translation of *Kung Fu Panda* we can find a lot of native expressions and four-character expressions, which are concise and conform to the Chinese syntactic structure. Therefore, the audience can easily understand the original dialogue with the help of these Chinese subtitles.

Example 1: “Legend tells of legendary warrior whose Kung Fu skills were the stuff of legend. He traveled the land in search of worthy foes.”

For the translation of this sentence, the translator adopts a domestication translation strategy. The translation is not completely faithful to the original text, but has adjusted the sentence structure according to the playwright’s intention, the original sentence is divided into short sentences, the use of four-character structure, in line with the thinking habits of the Chinese audience. For individual words such as “the stuff of legend”, “travelled the land”, “in search of worthy foes”, etc., the translator, after consideration, did not choose literal translation, but translated into Chinese four-character idioms, which are simple and concise, avoiding the blandness of the translation. These words are also familiar to the Chinese audience, which is in line with the kung fu theme of the film. The cultural background of the Chinese audience is taken into full consideration and facilitates Chinese readers to obtain the best contextual reading experience with less effort.<sup>[12]</sup>

Example 2: “One meets its destiny on the road he takes to avoid it.”

This line comes from the Zen master Oogway, and it has the meaning of Zen. If it is simply translated as “There’s no need to avoid it.”, it is difficult to reflect the profound philosophy. Here in this line, from the perspective of Skopos Theory, the domestication strategy is used. This line corresponds to an old Chinese saying, which can be borrowed here to better convey the proper connotation.

Example 3: “Po: I’m not a big fat panda. I’m the big fat panda. The Wuxi Finger Hold! Oh, you know this hold?”

Tai Lung: You’re bluffing. You’re bluffing. Shifu didn’t teach you that.

Po: Nope. I figured it out. Skadoosh!

In this dialogue, “a big fat panda” can be translated directly into Chinese and the latter “the big fat panda” translated into Chinese meaning is “the invincible big fat panda”. “The big fat 3 panda” is an equivalent expression of the “a big fat panda”. If “the” directly translated into Chinese means “this”, the target audience can also understand the meaning of “this”, it refers to “an invincible fat panda who becomes a kung fu master”, but this explanation is not in line with Chinese language expression habit. However, “the big fat panda” is translated into Chinese means “the invincible big fat panda”, it not only express the meaning of “this” but also conform to the characteristics of the Chinese language.

In this sentence, “figure out” is an English collocation, which means “work out” “thinking” “understand” and “solve”, etc. In this movie, the context of this sentence was that Tai Lung didn’t believe Shifu would teach Po kungfu, but Po proudly said that he learned kungfu by himself.



Therefore, it would be inappropriate once “figure out” is literally translated as those words above, for the target audience would feel uncomfortable. In this sense, the Chinese version translated through domestication strategy is indeed proper, given that this version can not only reflect the context in the movie, but also be accepted by the target audience.

#### 4.2.2. Free Translation

Free translation refers to the flexible translation according to the main idea of the original text, not abiding by the original form of expression strictly. The focus is more on conveying the connotation of the original language than on the correctness of the phrase as expressed in the literal translation of the source text. Based on the coherence rule and loyalty rule of Skopos Theory, sometimes free translation can make the translation easy to understand and accurate in expressing the meaning of the original language, which is exactly in line with the purpose of these two principles.

Example 4: “What were you doing up there? All that noise.”

The movie begins with the scene that the fatty Po gets up from bed. He makes many noises out of his large body and small room. When he rolls down the stairs, his father asks him the question. The translator does not translate the sentence “all that noise” word to word, instead he finds an onomatopoeia phrase in Chinese language to display the meaning of noises, which is much better than literal translation, because the onomatopoeia phrase helps audience to create a vivid picture in their mind, with the coordination of the film’s pictures, the impression of Po’s clumsiness is strengthened and consequently foreshadows the impossible task waiting for Po.

Example 5: “Go! Destroy this weapon, and bring Lord Shen to Justice.”

Under the system of enfeoffment in ancient China, the “wang ye” is a title of nobility, equivalent to a large landlord, governing his fiefdom, corresponding to the English “lord” and “city”, which are both faithful to the source language and easy to be accepted by the audience in the translated language, so the audience can easily generate a sense of affinity. Therefore, “Lord Shen” is translated into “Shen wangye”, Four-character Chinese was widely used in ancient times, and then gradually formed into idioms or fixed phrases, which are commonly used in modern Chinese. Therefore, it is easier for Chinese audiences to accept the use of four-character Chinese in translation. The translator should not only be faithful to the spirit of the original text, but also make the Chinese audience feel familiar with it. For example, “inner peace” has been translated in various ways. Although the translation is faithful to the original, it is still not as authentic as Chinese version and does not reflect the essence of kung fu. So the use of free translation here can make the target audience understand the film plot better,<sup>[13]</sup> which obeys the Skopos Theory.

#### 4.2.3. Use of Buzzwords

The invention of the computer brought about the popularity of the Internet, with the emergence of many popular network buzzwords. Because they’re catchy and spread fast, they have attracted many people’s attention and gradually become a part of people’s daily expressions, especially popular with young people. The audience of *Kung Fu Panda* are mainly young people and kids. Therefore, if the subtitle translation can be combined with network buzzwords and the acceptability of the audience, it will surely bring different artistic effects to the translation.

Example 6: “Awesome. How did you do that?”

Generally speaking, “awesome” can be used as an interjection to express inner joy and praise, meaning “it’s great”. But here, Po was surprised and expressed his admiration when he found that his master was able to play with water droplets with no distractions, concentration and ease. In Chinese translation, the translator not only expresses the original meaning, but also shortens the

distance with the audience. So this kind of translation is very humorous and conforms to the target language audiences' understanding habits. It makes the viewers laugh when watching this film, which obeys the Skopos Theory.

Example7: "I see you like to chew, maybe you should chew on my face!"

The scene of this sentence is that Po dreamt that he became a great warrior and was challenged by gangsters in a noodle shop. The translated text is more colloquial and vivid, suitable for the tone of a gangster. The Chinese translation is closer to the language of everyday life.

Example8: "Impressive, Dragon Warrior."

Impressive in Chinese translated text is a popular Internet buzzword that means to be helpful and inspiring. The translated text is a combination of current Chinese social buzzwords, and the language is vivid and close to the audience's daily life. Here the buzzword usage abides by the Skopos Theory and takes the target language audiences' habits into consideration, aiming to steal the audience's attention and increase the humorous effect of the film.

## 5. Conclusion

At the very beginning, this paper gives an introduction to subtitle translation. After that, the theoretical framework and mainly the three rules of Skopos Theory are presented. Then the author makes a descriptive analysis of the subtitle translation of *Kung Fu Panda* from the perspective of Skopos Theory, which is the focus of this paper. In the case study, examples selected from the movie are cited to illustrate how the translation strategies are applied and verify the effectiveness of the translation strategies on the basis of Skopos Theory.

Through the research of this paper, the author draws the following conclusions:

Firstly, Skopos Theory can serve as an effective approach to subtitle translation. Under the guidance of Skopos Theory, the audience can better appreciate the film and have the best viewing experience with the minimal cognitive effort. Secondly, Skopos Theory can provide translators with greater flexibility. Aiming to fulfill the purpose of subtitle translation successfully, the translator ought to conform to the Skopos Theory, process the information of the film in light of the cultural habits of the target language, and flexibly use translation strategies such as domestication, free translation, and buzzwords to convey the original information of film to the audience as comprehensively as possible.

Because of the limitation in space, this paper only selects some example sentences from the movie *Kung Fu Panda* for analysis, and the subtitle translation strategies adopted by translators under the guidance of Skopos Theory discussed in this paper are not applicable to all subtitle translations. The author hopes that this paper will attract more attention on the study of subtitle translation and find more applicable strategies to guide the film subtitle translation.

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