

# **An Analysis of the Translation of Cultural-loaded Words in the Subtitle of "Hi, Mom" from the Perspective of Communicative Translation**

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**Abstract:** In the context of emphasizing the enhancement of the international communication power of Chinese culture and the telling of compelling Chinese stories, an increasing number of outstanding Chinese films are making their way to the world stage. The quality of subtitle translation for these films holds great significance for their acceptance in overseas markets and for facilitating Sino-Western cultural exchanges. Based on the communicative translation theory and incorporating principles for translating culturally loaded words in subtitles, this paper takes the domestic film "Hi, Mom" as an example to explore how subtitle translation, under the framework of communicative translation, can better cater to the needs of cross-cultural communication, aiming to reduce the barriers posed by cultural differences and thereby promote mutual understanding and dissemination of cultures.

**Keywords:** Communicative translation; Translation of cultural loaded words; Hi, Mom; Chinese stories; Subtitle translation

## **1. Introduction**

With the changes of the times, people's entertainment options have become increasingly diverse, especially in the film and television industry. Excellent film and television works are also favored by audiences both at home and abroad. The film "Hi, Mom" is a family comedy produced jointly by Beijing Culture, New Force Media, and Big Bowl Entertainment. It was released nationwide on the first day of the Chinese New Year (February 12th) in 2021. Based on director Jia Ling's personal experience, the film tells the story of the heroine and her mother. In the process of cultural exchange and transmission, reducing the cultural differences between the source language and the target

language is often challenging. This paper analyzes the translation of cultural-loaded words in the subtitles of the film "Hi, Mom" based on the theory of communicative translation, exploring how translators bring the feelings of target language readers closer to those of source language readers, thereby achieving the purpose of communication.

## **2. Cultural-loaded Words in Film Subtitles**

### **2.1 Definition**

Regarding the definition of cultural-loaded words, Hu Xiaohua believes that cultural-loaded words can also be called semantically vacant words, referring to vocabulary with profound national cultural connotations and distinct regional characteristics[1]. These words reflect the unique activities gradually accumulated by a particular nation over a long historical process, which are distinct from other nations. Each country and nation has its unique characteristics in politics, economics, concepts, behavioral consciousness, customs, etc. With the changes of the times and different governance systems and social institutions, various countries have formed "their own" cultural-loaded words. Cultural-loaded words best embody the rich national color and distinctive cultural personality in language, helping nations to showcase their excellent cultures to the world and promote cross-cultural communication[2].

### **2.2 Difficulties in Translation**

The translation of any text presents its unique characteristics and challenges, and movie subtitles, in particular, differ significantly from the translation of articles and magazines. Zhang Cong and Wang Dengxia elaborate on the features of movie subtitles: 1. Temporal and Spatial Constraints: Firstly, subtitles are time-bound: within a movie, numerous sentences appear, and as soon as a scene ends,

the corresponding subtitles cease to display. Secondly, there are spatial limitations: the movie screen, apart from the visual content, must also accommodate subtitles within its limited length. Ideally, subtitles should fit within a single line to avoid detracting from the viewer's experience, especially in foreign language films [3]. This necessitates concise translations to facilitate viewing for international audiences [4]. As Li Yunxing observes, subtitles flash on the screen momentarily, imposing constraints on translation due to their transient nature [5].

2. Universality: Movies cater to a diverse audience, encompassing people of all ages and educational backgrounds [6]. Thus, movie subtitle translations must minimize cultural barriers to ensure that viewers with English cultural backgrounds can enjoy the film similarly to those with Chinese cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, Hu Xiaohua highlights the difficulty of translating culturally loaded words in subtitles, which are often succinct in form but rich in meaning [7]. Hence, translating these words necessitates concise yet profound expressions to bridge cultural gaps and enhance the viewing experience.

### 3. Communicative Translation

Han Dongfang posits that translation is a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communicative activity, with the ultimate goal of facilitating intercultural exchange [8]. Peter Newmark, a British translation theorist, first introduced the concept of communicative translation in his 1982 essay collection, *Approaches to Translation*. As the name suggests, communicative translation aims to produce an effect on the target language reader as closely as possible to that obtained on the original language reader, thereby achieving the purpose of communication. Compared to other translation theories, communicative translation focuses on conveying information according to the target language's linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic norms, rather than replicating the original text faithfully. This approach grants translators significant freedom, allowing them to modify typography, style, and even the author's errors, if necessary, to facilitate comprehension by the target audience. Consequently, the translated text is liberated from the linguistic constraints of the original, fulfilling a specific communicative intention. In recent years, Chinese scholars have conducted

various studies from the perspective of communicative translation theory. Yang Junyan and He Lingjing analyzed culturally loaded words in the American version of *Legend of Zhen Huan* using communicative translation theory, discussing their classifications and examples, such as ecological, material, religious, socio-cultural, and linguistic culturally loaded words [9]. Wang Lin, on the other hand, focused on culturally loaded words, exploring their origins, meanings, characteristics, and functions, and studied their translation in news English to convey their underlying meanings [10].

### 4. Subtitle Translation of "Hi, Mom" Based on Communicative Translation Theory

The translation strategies of domestication and foreignization were introduced by Lawrence Venuti in his 1995 book, *The Translator's Invisibility* [11]. As complementary yet opposing translation strategies, neither absolute domestication nor absolute foreignization exists. The movie "Hi, Mom" is set in the 1980s, replete with distinct Chinese elements from that era. The translators of the subtitles aptly employed various translation methods under the guidance of both domestication and foreignization strategies to achieve the objectives of communicative translation.

#### 4.1 Foreignization Strategy

Foreignization refers to the translator's effort to stay as close as possible to the original author during the translation process, preserving the original style of the work and allowing the target language readers to experience the charm of foreign cultures, thereby fostering their awareness of cultural differences. It possesses a certain degree of cultural interaction and dissemination.

##### 4.1.1 Literal translation

Hu Meirong and Wang Xiaoli argue that literal translation involves ensuring that the meaning of the original text is not lost while maximizing the retention of the content and form of the film, based on the characteristics of both the source and target languages. Importantly, literal translation does not mean rigid or inflexible translation; rather, it strives for direct translation while fully conveying the content and intention of the original text.

Example 1: "Dōu shuō nǚ ér shì mā mā de xiǎo mián áo, kě wǒ shì wǒ mā de diào."

Translation: In Chinese culture, the saying "a

daughter is like a cozy cotton-padded jacket to her mother" is deeply ingrained, as it vividly portrays daughters as being more attentive, considerate, and nurturing compared to sons. Here, "cotton-padded jacket" not only refers to an actual garment but also embodies the warmth and care that a daughter provides to her mother. In translating this phrase, the translator cleverly employed the strategy of foreignization, translating "cotton-padded jacket" directly as "cotton-padded jacket" while adding the word "cozy" to enhance the warmth conveyed by this metaphor, thereby preserving the metaphorical meaning and cultural characteristics of the source language. However, the subsequent phrase "I'm more like a luxurious fur coat" in the original text serves as a humorous escalation of the previous statement, with *mink* being seen as a luxurious and precious symbol in Chinese culture, here used to describe the daughter's extraordinary care and importance to her mother. The translator rendered "diāo" as "luxurious fur coat," not only conveying the metaphorical meaning of the original text but also emphasizing the daughter's unique status in her mother's heart through the word "luxurious." Through such a translation, even if foreign viewers are not directly familiar with the metaphorical meaning within this cultural context, as the plot of the film unfolds, particularly through the various expressions of affection from the daughter Jia Xiaoling to her mother Li Huanying, they can gradually grasp the profound emotions behind "cotton-padded jacket" and "luxurious fur coat." This translation of culturally loaded words not only allows foreign viewers to gain a deeper understanding of the metaphorical meanings in Chinese language but also enables them to feel the unspeakable bond between mother and daughter. At the same time, this translation approach also reflects the translator's respect and transmission of Chinese culture.

#### 4.1.2 Transliteration

Transliteration, as its name suggests, is a method of translating the sound of a word from one language into a similar or identical sound in another language. The Chinese-English Bilingual Modern Chinese Dictionary explains that transliteration involves representing a word from one language in another language using a similar or identical pronunciation, aiming to allow viewers to experience the cultural characteristics and authentic expressions of the

source language.

Example 2: Wǒ men zhè xiē rén tǒng chēng wéi gǔ huò zǎi.

Translation: All of us are to be known as Goo Wak Chai.

Analysis: "gǔ huò zǎi" is a unique term in Cantonese, originally referring to someone cunning and shrewd, later extended to refer to teenagers with eccentric behaviors. Popular in Guangdong and other cities, it often refers to gangsters or those involved in organized crime, gaining popularity through a series of films, especially among young people. The translator uses the Wade-Giles Romanization method to translate "gǔ huò zǎi" as Goo Wak Chai, enabling viewers to directly experience the cultural nuances of the source language and understand how Chinese refers to such individuals.

## 4.2 Domestication Strategy

Domestication involves localizing the source language to cater to the target language or the target audience, adopting expressions familiar to the target readers to convey the content of the original text. It requires the translator to approach the target audience, speaking like a native author, facilitating better comprehension, and enhancing the readability and enjoyment of the translation.

### 4.2.1 Free Translation

Free translation, as the name implies, translates based on the general meaning of the original text, differing significantly from literal translation in that it does not adhere to word-for-word translation or the original format and structure. Numerous examples demonstrate that free translation reflects the differences between different linguistic groups in various aspects such as ecological, linguistic, religious, material, and social cultures. Free translation better showcases the linguistic characteristics of the target language.

Example 3: Zhí dào hòu lái wǒ cái fā xiàn, yuán lái nǚ dà shí bā biàn, shì piàn rén de.

Translation: It was till much later that I realized that, as it turns out, not every little girl grows up to be beautiful.

Analysis: The phrase "nǚ dà shí bā biàn" is a well-known idiomatic expression in Chinese culture. It originally refers to the significant changes in appearance and personality that a girl undergoes during her developmental growth. Over time, this phrase evolved into a positive

metaphor, suggesting that some girls who may not have been considered conventionally attractive when young will become increasingly beautiful as they mature. However, in the context of this sentence, the speaker is expressing disappointment that this is not always the case.

The translator has done an excellent job of conveying the meaning of this idiomatic expression to a foreign audience. By translating "nǚ dà shí bā biàn, shì piàn rén de" as "not every little girl blossoms into a beauty," the translator has preserved the essential idea that not all girls will grow up to be beautiful, despite the popular belief. Furthermore, the translator has taken into account the instantaneous nature of film subtitles. The translation is concise and to the point, allowing foreign viewers to quickly grasp the meaning of the idiomatic expression without missing any crucial plot points. The use of the word "blossoms" in the translation is particularly effective. It not only conveys the idea of growing up and becoming beautiful but also adds a touch of poetic language that is often found in idiomatic expressions. This helps to create a sense of cultural authenticity for foreign viewers.

Overall, this translation is a great example of how to effectively convey idiomatic expressions to a foreign audience while preserving the essential meaning and cultural context. By combining concise language with a deep understanding of the cultural nuances, the translator has successfully bridged the gap between Chinese and English-speaking audiences.

#### 4.2.2 Omission

Omission is a translation method that corresponds to amplification, involving deleting words that do not conform to the target language's thinking patterns, language habits, or modes of expression to avoid cumbersome translations. Typically, some information may not significantly contribute to the film's narrative or exceed the comprehension of the target audience, making it unnecessary to translate obscure details. Instead, retaining the essence of the main message lightens the audience's cognitive load and achieves the purpose of communication.

Example 4: Rán hòu, zhè gè shí hòu, zhè gè dà pàng yā zi, bù zhī dào cóng nǎ, pā yī xià zi, jiù bǎ yīng zi gěi zá dǐ le.

Translation: The phrase "dà pàng yā zi" in the

original text is a nickname filled with affection, commonly used by elders when referring to younger females who are relatively plump and perceived as cute. The main focus of this sentence is to describe how Jia Xiaoling, the daughter, suddenly appears. If the translator were to explain "dà pàng yā zi" in detail, the subtitle would be too long, violating the constraints of time and space in subtitle translation. Additionally, it could detract from the main point and disrupt the viewing experience. Therefore, the translator simply translates it as "big girl." The phrase "pā yī xià zi" in the original text is an onomatopoeia used to describe the sound of a heavy object falling. Given the fleeting nature of film subtitles, there is no need to explain the meaning of the onomatopoeia here. Hence, the translator directly translates it as "landed," fulfilling the requirements of subtitle translation and achieving the purpose of communication.

In summary, the translator has taken into account the unique challenges of subtitle translation, such as the constraints of time and space, and has successfully conveyed the intended meaning and emotion of the original text to English-speaking audiences while maintaining a concise and clear translation. Therefore, the translation "That's when this big girl fell from god knows where and landed on Ying" is appropriate.

#### 4.2.3 Amplification

Amplification involves adding necessary information that is not present in the original text during translation, based on the different modes of thinking, linguistic habits, and expression styles between English and Chinese, to accurately convey the meaning contained in the original text. Given the instantaneity and annotation-free nature of subtitles, amplification is also necessary in subtitle translation to ensure the audience's comprehension.

Example 5: Nǐ shuō wǒ dàng nǐ yī huí nǚ ér, lián ràng nǐ gāo xìng yī cì dōu méi yǒu zuò guò.

Translation: I'm a lousy daughter who has never even made you proud once.

Analysis: The original text, spoken by a daughter, conveys a sense of guilt and inadequacy towards her mother. The translator has accurately translated this sentiment by using the phrase "I'm a lousy daughter," which effectively communicates the daughter's self-perception of being a disappointment.

The translator has also added the phrase "who



has never even made you proud once" to the translation. This phrase clarifies the daughter's sense of failure and regret in not bringing joy or pride to her mother. By incorporating this phrase, the translator has successfully conveyed the cultural nuance of traditional Chinese parenting, where parents often take pride in their children's achievements. Furthermore, the translator's use of the word "lousy" adds an element of exaggeration to the translation, which is often used in film dialogue to emphasize emotions. This helps to create a sense of drama and urgency in the scene, making the daughter's statement more impactful.

In conclusion, this translation conveys emotions, cultural nuances, and character traits in film dialogue while maintaining the original meaning and tone of the text. The translator has successfully enriched the translation by incorporating cultural context and character traits, making it more relatable and impactful for the audience.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper delves into the translation of culturally loaded words in film subtitles based on the communicative translation theory. Firstly, subtitle translation is constrained by temporal and spatial limitations and is intended for a mass audience, necessitating the selection of suitable translation strategies tailored to these characteristics. Culturally loaded words, imbued with national characteristics, require translators to conduct in-depth, multi-dimensional analyses of linguistic culture and modes of thinking to accurately convey China's outstanding culture to foreign viewers, thereby achieving the purpose of communication. In the translation process of culturally loaded words in subtitles, various difficulties may arise. Therefore, translators must integrate domestication and foreignization strategies to find the most suitable approach, preserving national characteristics to the greatest extent possible, ultimately resulting in accurate and fluent translations of culturally loaded words.

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