

# Subtitle Translation on *Titanic* with Communicative Translation Theory

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## Abstract

Subtitle translation is essential to help Chinese audiences enjoy foreign movies aesthetically. As a well-known translation theorist, Peter Newmark's Communicative Translation Theory offers numerous suggestions for translators. This paper will choose *Titanic* as a case and discuss the translation strategies that the translator adopts under the guidance of Communicative Translation Theory. The first part is divided into three parts, focusing on the introduction of subtitle translation. The second part is the overview of Newmark's Communicative translation Theory and current research outcomes, which sets up a theoretical framework for the thesis. At the same time, the third part consists of specific case studies and the translation skills that the translator adopts, such as the use of Chinese idioms, conversion, free translation and domestication to figure out how these translations convey the original meaning and emotions to target language audiences. Finally, the author discusses the outlook of subtitle translations.

## Keywords

Subtitle Translation, Communicative Translation Theory, *Titanic*, Peter Newmark, Translation Strategies

## 1. Introduction

This paper aims to analyze how the information of the film *Titanic* is conveyed to the Chinese audience, and cultural exchanges are achieved through subtitle translation under the guidance of Peter Newmark's communicative translation theory.

Newmark's communicative translation theory values target language readers' responses and functions as a bridge to enhance cultural exchanges. "Communicative translation attempts to produce on its readers an effect as close as possible

to that obtained on the readers of the original” (Newmark, 1981). Given this, under the guidance of communicative translation theory, the translated subtitles can convey the film’s information, meaning and emotions to the audience. It will be constructive to study subtitle translation by using this theory.

First, a brief introduction of Peter Newmark’s communicative translation theory and some background information will be given. After that, examples of subtitle translation from the movie *Titanic* will be analyzed and discussed under the guidance of Newmark’s communicative translation theory.

From the analysis, the author finds that using different translation methods and techniques under the guidance of communicative translation theory will make subtitle translations more natural and idiomatic. The target language audience can fully enjoy the movie as the source language audience does. However, the adoption of over-domestication does not match the style of the movie and may confuse the audience, which should be improved.

## 2. Theoretical Framework of Translation

Peter Newmark is an outstanding translation theorist who has proposed numerous practical theories. Among them, the communicative translation theory is one of his significant contributions to translation studies and exerts tremendous influence worldwide. In his main work, *Approaches in Translation*, (Newmark, 1981) proposed that “Communicative Translation attempts to produce on its readers an effect as close as possible to that obtained on the readers of the original.” The key of communicative translation theory is to “strive to translate have the same effect on the target language readers as the original ones” (Newmark, 1981). In other words, he views that this theory concentrates on conveying information according to the language and culture of the source language rather than copying the original texts as faithfully as possible.

Newmark also assumes that the translator should adopt different methods according to different text types (Newmark, 1981). Aiming to convey information and allowing readers to think, feel and act, concentrating on readers’ understanding and response, the communicative translation attaches great importance to serving the target readers.

Communicative translation theory has very distinct characteristics. It is reader-oriented, flexible and smooth. Newmark classified different types of texts: expressive, informative and appellative. In *A Textbook of Translation*, he pointed out that “the semantic translation applies to the informative and appellative texts” (Newmark, 1981). Movies are expressive, for they can convey meaning and emotions to the audience. Thus, communicative translation theory is suitable and beneficial to make the audience understand the movie.

“The distinction between semantic and communicative translation ... when it meant perhaps ‘interpretation of the meaning of life.’ thus an affirmative attitude to translation would perhaps stem from a belief in nationalism, in the communicability and renewal of common experience, in ‘innate’ human nature and

even human in law” (Newmark, 1981). Different from semantic translation, communicative translation is clearer and more conventional. Semantic translation highlights the translation should be “... as closely as the semantic and syntactic structures” (Newmark, 1981), which should be equivalent in terms of form and the original meaning. But communicative translation is not a sole translation strategy, and translators can adopt free translation, literal translation and other techniques to clarify the true meaning behind the sentences.

As the film market has grown by leaps and bounds, especially with the vigorous development of foreign films. In the 1950s and 1960s, researches on subtitle translation were popular in western countries. In 1960, an article named “Cinema of Traduction” was published by Babel Press, marking a revolutionary beginning of theoretical research for subtitle translation. In the 1990s, China’s research on subtitle translation also emerged. Zhang Chunbai noted that movies’ dubbing should be highly valued. At the same time, Li Yunxing thought the vitality of subtitle translation was to provide the most relevant information within a limited time and space.

The emergence of subtitle translation follows the trend of the film market. It serves as a communication carrier, gradually becoming a vital part of translation activities, and many translation techniques have been adopted. Meanwhile, Chinese audiences are eager to know more about western artistic culture through movies. However, linguistic barriers still exist due to the differences between source language (SL) and target language (TL). Given this, subtitle translation is a core to transferring the source language’s elements into the target language’s own cultures to the audience.

Functioning as an informative text, subtitles should be accurately translated and conveyed to help TL audiences directly understand the original meaning. So, the semantic translation will only stress the surface meaning of the source text, which is not suitable to guide the translation. However, communicative translation is more precise and can convey deeper meanings by adopting domestication, foreignization and other strategies since subtitle translation aims to effectively convey the most relevant information to audiences in a particular cultural background. Also, it is necessary to translate the subtitles concisely and comprehensibly to the audience as much as possible.

Therefore, subtitle translation and communicative translation theory are deeply connected, for they all highlight the understanding of target audiences, produce communicative effects, and express the original meaning as much as possible.

*Titanic* is one of the most classic movies directed by James Cameron and starred by Leonardo Dicaprio and Kate Winslet. In 1998, *Titanic* was on show in China and went to the top of the box office for a long time. It is still popular among Chinese audiences with the theme of undying love. The translation of its subtitles is also attractive and localized, which makes the audience steep in the movie and deeply resonates with the characters. Next are some preparations that the author does before the study.

### 3. Translation Process

#### 3.1. Pre-Study

Complete preparation of a translation activity will lay the foundation for further study of this paper. Before starting the research, the author also made preparations, including researching Newmark's communicative translation theory, the guidance for subtitle translation under Communicative Translation Theory, and the reason for choosing *Titanic*.

Choosing Newmark's Communicative Translation Theory and subtitle translation: Newmark has said that "... notably than in the translation of the most important religious, philosophical, artistic and scientific texts, assuming second readers as informed and interested as the first" (Newmark, 1981). As an essential communication tool in the movie, subtitles are vital to conveying artistic information and emotions to the target language audience. No matter what kind of text it is, "... all art is to a great or lesser extent allegorical, figurative, metaphorical and a parable, and therefore has a communicative purpose" (Newmark, 1981). He also pointed out, "Again, the immediate communicative importance of drama is usually greater than that of poetry or scientific fiction ..." (Newmark, 1981). Given this, using communicative theory is visceral to highly artistic dramas. While an expressive kind of drama, the movie serves as a carrier to convey the original movie's emotions and meanings to the target language audience. Communicative Translation Theory functions as a bridge to smoothly combine the source language movie and target language audience, for it can accurately convey the meanings and reaches an artistic degree.

As for the choice of *Titanic*, this movie is not only a masterwork that shows the pure love of people but also reveals the reality and the gap between the upper-class and ordinary people. It serves as a mirror to reflect the society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and possesses a great artistic value. First, the author reviewed the personal information of the main characters, including their background and the development of their romantic relationships. Second, the author consulted other experienced translators about the use of some applications which are very useful in the research process.

#### 3.2. During-Study

This stage is a critical step in the whole project. Under Newmark's Communicative Translation Theory's guidance, subtitle translators are expected to convey the original meaning with a high-quality translation fully. To make the whole research process smoother, the author watched *Titanic* thoroughly to know the story's main idea and selected five typical examples to discuss intensely.

Dividing this paper into three parts, the third part is the focus of it. Specific examples are selected from the movie, and a deep discussion has been launched. The author studies what translation skills the translator adopts to translate subtitles and how the communicative translation theory is applied to guide these translation skills into practice. These translation strategies are all in line with

Chinese audiences; very idiomatic reading habits. According to Newmark, “Normally in communicative translation, it is assumed that the readers of the translation identify with those of the original” (Newmark, 1981). The translator needs to consider the accepting capability of the audience, so when translating, Newmark said that “He has to assess (a)the extent of the readers’ knowledge of and interest in the relevant aspect of the source language or culture” (Newmark, 1981). While after discussion, these translation strategies have distinctive characteristics: the use of Chinese idioms will make the translation understandable to the Chinese audience, and the adoption of domestication and conversion. The translator considers the audience and makes the translation more natural and idiomatic.

### 3.3. Post-Study

This stage is a necessary step for self-improvement. After analyzing the specific cases, the author also found that there still exist limitations.

Newmark described both communicative and semantic translation: “The above is an attempt to narrow the range and definition of good translation ... I also believe that many texts present few or no difficulties to a translator and that an effective, if the approximate, translation of any text into any language is always possible (Newmark, 1981). The translator should fully put the audience’s acceptance first when translating subtitles. However, he still misused domestication in his translation. His version may confuse the audience and not align with the character’s personality.” Otherwise, the translator has to bear in mind a composite identikit reader, following appropriate TL usage, modifying, correcting and improving the latest versions of the fair copy of his translation often without any reference to the original (Newmark, 1981). The translator did not use proper translation skills to overcome the gap between the source language movie and the target audience.

Moreover, the author searched the movie on the Chinese TV player Tencent, and this version will be different from others. Second, the author needs to solve the problems that emerged in the former stage, such as how to use domestication properly. In addition, the author needs to learn from others to improve her study profoundly. This stage will be beneficial for her in the next project.

## 4. Analysis of Subtitles Based on Communicative Translation Theory

The critical point of communicative translation theory is to emphasize the recipients’ response and understanding and make the translated text understandable to the target readers. The theory stresses that a translation should serve the target readers, and translators are dominant. Hence, it is necessary for translators to fully understand the original text and take their comprehension ability into account, which means translators can adequately interpret the original text and correct some errors, eliminate ambiguities and adjust the style to improve the

translation and help the Chinese audience understand the film. Given this, translators can adopt different translation methods when translating subtitles, such as conversion translation, free translation, and domestication.

#### 4.1. Lexical Level: Use of Chinese Idioms

Idioms are unique in East Asia; they exist in Chinese, Japanese and other languages. An idiom is a fixed phrase expressing a fixed meaning, often with historical stories. Most idioms also appear with four characters and are widely used in vernacular, classical Chinese, or daily conversations. In *Titanic*, the translator adopts some classical Chinese idioms when translating this sentence to help the Chinese audience better understand the implied and deeper meaning of the subtitles.

Example 1:

Something Picasso.

译: 无名小卒

This was the conversation between Carl and Rose when they were in the first-class lounge in *Titanic*. Rose was hooked on Picasso's artwork, although he was not famous then, whereas Carl was dismissive of Picasso.

A high-quality translation will make the audience enjoy a localized series as much as possible. When translating this sentence, the translator adopts Chinese idioms and breaks the original structure, making the translation vivid. The idiom “无名小卒” is a typical Chinese idiom, which is originated from *The Three Kingdoms*, and refers to a man who is unknown and not famous. This translation is under the Chinese context because Chinese people are familiar with it. There are many equivalent words between Chinese and English, even though they are pretty different. The equivalence rate of the word is highest. Using Chinese idioms can be an easier way for Chinese audiences to understand the movie, for it brings them closer to the Chinese cultural context and makes them more interested in the movie's progressive plots.

In the opinion of Newmark's communicative translation, he viewed that the translator “has to assess 1) the extent of his reader's knowledge of and interest in the relevant aspect of the source language or culture, 2) the text's level of specialism. Suppose he is writing for the general reader. In that case, he may achieve his purpose by transcribing the appropriate new SL terms unlikely to be familiar to his reader and adding their approximate cultural equivalences (e.g. *Fachhochschule* or polytechnic)” (Newmark, 1981). These audiences are all general readers but are familiar with classic Chinese idioms. Therefore, idioms are visceral for them to enjoy on the artistic level. At the same time, the delivery of contextual meaning, idea, and language form of the original text should be easily understood by the target readers. Therefore, the translation is for the Chinese audience's convenience.

#### 4.2. Syntactic Level: Use of Conversion Translation

Sentences are informative and consist of words and phrases. Communicative

translation theory highlights the contextual meaning, so before translating, translators need to have a clear understanding of the sentences in the source language and judge whether they can be translated accurately; if not, the translation will be illogical, and barriers will be made for the target language audiences, making them confused about the meaning, theme and emotions in the movie. According to communicative translation theory, when translating sentences, translators can adjust and modify the original contents to express the implied meaning or connotation to the target language audiences. By adopting different translation skills like conversion, omission and other methods, the original sentence structures are modified into more idiomatic ones for target language audiences to understand. Hence, they will better enjoy the movie's plots. In this part, translators use conversion translation skills to translate the sentences.

"Conversion can make the translation more smooth (Liu, 2013). It is an overall translation skill perspective, also named shift of perspective, for it can reconstruct the sentences and ... conveying the information from a different or even opposite perspective, which aims to make the target text structurally and semantically adjustable" (Ke, 1992). In this sentence, nouns are converted to verbs so that the translation will be suitable for the target language audiences' reading habits.

Example 2:

Next, it will be brandies in the smoking room.

译: 接下来是吞云吐雾, 小酌对饮的时间。

This scene was at the end of the dinner. After "fighting wit" with Carl and Rose's mother, Jack finished this dinner "peacefully." At the same time, those "gentlemen" were about to brag and show off their wealth. Being tired of such a situation, Rose did not hide her contempt for them, so she wanted to leave and satirize those gentlemen.

The translator reorganizes the sentence structure when translating this sentence and makes the translation vivid and clear for Chinese audiences. In this sentence, the nouns are all converted into verbs, and the use of Chinese four-character idioms can make Chinese audiences understandable the emotions of Rose and the sentence's meaning, for these idioms are common in the Chinese contextual environment. "吞云吐雾" refers to someone who smokes without restraint, and "小酌对饮" refers to some people drink at a party. Moreover, the implementation of conversion can imply the deeper meaning behind the two nouns--The luxurious life that the "upper-classes" live, which can help audiences understand a scene of the so-called upper-class. In the original sentence, "brandies" and "the smoking room" are nouns and refer to "白兰地" and "吸烟室", respectively, but these two words demonstrate the verbs' meaning in the film because those gentlemen will brag and boaster their wealth when they are smoking and drinking in the lounge. To make the audience understand what will happen next, it is necessary to show what those gentlemen do. After converting the two nouns into verbs "吞云吐雾" and "小酌对饮", the scene will become vivid and specific. By using these two common Chinese four-character



idioms, audiences can even resonate with Rose and imagine how those upper-class people smoke and drink by associating this image with some cases in Chinese society because the such phenomenon is also typical in some parties and after-work drinks in China. Therefore, the translation will be more reasonable and natural.

Newmark assumed that “A sentence ... must be explicated by precisely what the translator believes the writer to have intended, normally retaining both the literal and the symbolical/figurative interpretation” (Newmark, 1981). The translator understood that the director wanted to satirize a bold reality of the upper-class society, and he also wanted to convey such an iconic situation to the Chinese audience. Moreover, the translator followed the director’s original intention and translated awesomely.

Converting these nouns into verbs is more idiomatic because, in Chinese, verbs are more common than nouns (Zhang, 2018). The communicative translation theory focuses the contextual meaning. Moreover, by adopting conversion skills, the sentence is easily in line with the target language audiences’ expression rules and reading habits. Moreover, the translation is more natural and idiomatic for the Chinese audience to understand what will happen next. Hence, they are fully considered by the translator, and the idea of the “reader-oriented” principle has been interpreted in the translation.

### 4.3. Use of Free Translation

Here are two examples adopted by free translation. Different from literal translation, one of the features of free translation is to break the original form and convey the implied meaning of the original text. According to communicative translation theory, “the communicative translation may be preferable to make the utterance on first reading more comprehensible and attractive” (Newmark, 1981), and to make target language readers understandable the original text, the translator can replenish, adjust and even modify the content of the source text. In this part, the translator adopts free translation to help the audience better understand the implied and deeper meaning of what Jack said, which will make Jack’s figure fuller and more vivid.

Example 3:

Lots of girls are willing to take their clothes off.

译：许多女孩都愿意为艺术献身。

This was the conversation between Rose and Jack when Rose saw Jack’s artwork. To express her gratitude to Jack, they were chatting on the board. Interested by Jack’s fantastic drawings, Rose asked him stories behind the paintings, and Jack told her about his experience in Paris, including the girls he met in the bar.

By adopting free translation skills to translate this sentence, the translator not only improves the logic of this sentence but also conveys the real meaning of this sentence to the audience. One of the merits of this method is accurately convey-



ing the implied meaning by breaking the original form. In the sentence “take their clothes off”, the translator does not directly translate it as: “脱掉她们的衣服”. It does not mean it is wrong if the translation is “脱掉她们的衣服”, but the audience will be confused: Jack is an artist; why does he ask these girls to take their clothes off? What will they do? Is Paris so free? A good translation should not confuse the target readers, so translating this sentence as “为艺术献身” will explain the implied meaning that these girls take their clothes off they are pleased to be Jack’s mannequins. Accordingly, the audience will be clear about the contextual plots in the film. Given this, the artistry of this film is increased.

Newmark views that “the original author does not ‘communicate’ with the reader any more than the translator, in an artistic text” (Newmark, 1981). The director wanted to make Jack’s character more vivid. Thus he arranged for Jack and Rose to chat to become more familiar. Moreover, the translator understood that Jack was an artist; the communicative translation focuses on the recipients’ understanding and responses in the first place. Hence, the translator modifies the expressions and successfully converts the “source text” information to the “target language” subtitles. Moreover, the subtitles are more natural and smoother for the Chinese audience to understand Jack’s personality in the film: he is brave, warm-hearted, professional and respectful to women. They can resonate with Rose and understand the emotions that the movie wants to convey.

#### 4.4. Cultural Level: Use of Free Translation

Eugene Nida has said, for a truly successful translation, biculturalism is even more critical than bilingualism since words only have meanings in terms of the cultures in which they function (Nida, 1993). Every country has unique cultures, so it is necessary to master foreign cultures to convey the information accurately. If adopting semantic and accessible translation, foreign readers may misunderstand because it is difficult for them to find corresponding culturally loaded words. While following communicative translation theory, domestication and free translation strategies, those mistakes can be avoided, and these cultural elements can be explained more clearly. Following are some examples:

Example 4:

You jump, I jump.

译: 生死相随

This scene was the climax of the film. When the Titanic began to sink, everyone was anxious to get into the lifeboat. However, Rose gave up a chance and rushed to Jack. She told him that she would be with Jack until death separated them. This was the most touching scene, and this sentence was also the movie’s punchline.

The translation of this sentence is equally iconic. By using free translation, the translator breaks the original form of the sentence and sublimates the theme of the movie: the pure and undying love of Jack and Rose. The word “生死相随” is

concise but powerful, making the sentence poetic and demonstrating the deep and undying love between Jack and Rose. The free translation method aims to convey the information of the original language to the target readers by converting it to the idiomatic target language. To strengthen the mood and sorrowful atmosphere, the adoption of free translation further shows the love between Rose and Jack and attracts the audience to resonate with the two characters. If just translating this sentence to: “你跳，我就跳”，It also makes sense, but the audience will not be touched by the deep emotions of the two protagonists. Newmark argued that “the communicative translation is to strive to translate have the same effect on the target language readers as the original. The effect is the same” (Newmark, 1981). If the translation is: “你跳，我就跳。”, the audience may not appreciate the theme deeply because the translation is dull and just conveys the surface meaning, and the same effect will also not be reproduced. Accordingly, the translation as “生死相随” will strengthen the cultural bonds between the audience and the film. By using this flowery word, the Chinese cultural background can be reflected because the Chinese audiences may come across traditional Chinese love stories, such as *the cowherd and the weaving maiden*, when they are deeply touched by this subtitle.

Newmark viewed that “Aesthetic truth, like music, is perhaps more general quality than meaning” (Newmark, 1981). The movie has its own authentic value; audiences are not only eager to understand the plots but also want to enjoy the movie authentically, from the emotions to the theme. While placing readers in the highest position and using free translation is a good approach when translating this sentence, for it can make the audience experience the same emotions as the original audiences do.

#### 4.5. Overuse of Domestication

Just as what has been mentioned before, following domestication theory can also explain the cultural elements. Therefore, mastering foreign culture to accurately convey the information to the audience is necessary. According to Venuti, “domestication is a reader-oriented strategy that refers to translating the source language into the localized target language and making target language readers understandable about the original text” (Venuti, 2004). The communicative translation reproduces the original content as well as the exact contextual meaning and is achieved in an acceptable and understandable way to the target language readers (Ye, 2013). Hence, using domestication not only brings foreign culture to the target readers but also smoothly conveys the relatively accurate meaning to them.

However, there still exists a problem with domestication. This problem will lead to misunderstandings among the audience. Here is an example.

Example 5:

Her clothes are all moth-eaten.

译：衣带渐宽终不悔

This was also the conversation between Jack and Rose when they were on the board. When talking about Jack's artworks, he told Rose the story of "Madame Bi Joux": To wait for her husband, the lady wears all her jewellery and sits at the bar every night. However, she never waits for her husband's back, and all her clothes are worn down.

To highlight the image of "Madame Bi Joux", the translator adopts domestication to translate Jack's words. Using domestication will bring the alien culture to the readers in the target culture more closely and help them better understand the translated text. However, overuse of domestication will also make the translation too "local" and against the style of the movie as well as the personality of the characters, which will confuse the audience.

"衣带渐宽终不悔" is a famous phrase that aims to praise lofty and pure love; it was written by Liu Yong, a well-known Ci writer in Song Dynasty. To make the image of "Mrs. Jewelry" more vivid, the translator chooses to quote China's Song Ci when translating the sentence. However, this sentence was said by Jack. Jack was uneducated and worked as a poor artist to make a living. Thus he couldn't say such scholarly words. The audience may feel awkward when hearing an uneducated American quoting a traditional Chinese phrase because the translation will confuse them. If just translating this sentence as: "她的衣服都磨烂了", the audience will feel reasonable about this character and know clearly about the context of the film.

"Communicative translation is always concentrated on the reader, but the equivalent-effect element is in operant if the text is out of TL space and time" (Newmark, 1981). The translator just ignored the audience's acceptance of the movie, for the translation is out of TL space. The translator should focus on the effect produced on the target language readers as same as the effect produced on the source language readers. In this sentence, even though the audience may feel the deep love that the lady has for his husband, the remarks said Jack are not in line with his characteristic. Newmark stresses that the translated version is supposed to be faithful to the content rather than the form of the original ones. Given this, it will be better for the audience to understand the whole sentence without any confusion. The communicative translation should serve the target readers; hence the translators should take the audience's comprehension into account, and the overuse of domestication may lead to strange feelings in the audience and cause confusion. Thus, the translator should consider the extent of the target audience's acceptance and the source text when adopting domestication translation strategy.

## 5. Conclusion

From what has been discussed above, under the guidance of communicative translation theory, these translated subtitles are smoother and more natural for the audience to understand. When translating these subtitles, the translator highly values the audiences' understanding and responses by using different

translation methods, including free translation, conversion translation, and domestication. Accordingly, the audience can completely enjoy this film.

However, there still exists some limitations. The movie that the author chose was a romantic one, which aimed to conveying emotions and communicating with the audience. When discussing other types of films, such as detective ones and realistic ones, which are not expressive types, the author should consider what goals of those movies want to express. Newmark has said that “In principle, semantic translation for works of philosophy, religion, anthropology even politics, in texts where the manner and the matter are fused, which are therefore well written, then the translation must be more explicit and fuller ...” (Newmark, 1981). Given this, when studying informative movies, semantic translation skill will be more accurate and suitable than communicative translation, because the translation will be the interpretation of a film.

In the future, the author will use Eugene Nida’s Functional Equivalence Theory to discuss how the subtitles’ meaning be precisely expressed by the translator.

Only by making the target language audience fully enjoy the film and appreciate the same manner as the original language audience through natural subtitles can cultural exchanges be achieved. Subtitle translation functions as an important communicative bridge to help the audience understand foreign cultures through these films. Moreover, communicative translation theory also takes the target readers’ response and understanding. Therefore, under the guidance of this theory, when analyzing this film, it will be useful to link the target language audience to the foreign film and enhance cultural exchanges.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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