

Chinese-to-English Subtitle Translation Methods in Huzhou Promotional Films from a Relevance-Theoretic Perspective: A Case Study of *Beautiful China, Dynamic Huzhou*

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Abstract: Urban international promotional films serve as core media for cross-cultural regional communication, and the quality of English subtitles directly determines overseas audiences' acceptance of local culture. Taking Huzhou's tourism promotional film *Beautiful China, Dynamic Huzhou* as research corpus, this paper constructs a three-dimensional analytical framework based on Relevance Theory, including cognitive context adaptation, ostensive-inferential optimization and optimal relevance focus. Six targeted translation methods are summarized through typical subtitle cases. This study verifies the explanatory power of Relevance Theory for promotional subtitling, and supplies operable translation strategies to balance cultural dissemination and readers' cognitive processing effort.

Keywords: Relevance Theory, Urban Promotional Film, Subtitle Translation.

1. Introduction

Against the background of national cultural construction and integrated development of the Yangtze River Delta, city tourism promotional videos have become vital carriers for exporting regional culture overseas. Subtitle translation is restricted by screen space and display time, so translators need to coordinate full cultural delivery and reduce foreign readers' reasoning burden [1]. This balancing act requires a theoretical framework that addresses both linguistic transfer and cognitive processing.

Relevance Theory defines communication as ostensive-inferential cognitive activity, which provides complete theoretical logic to resolve conflicts in audiovisual translation [2]. Current scholars have widely applied Relevance Theory to general film subtitle research, yet little research targets the subtitling of Huzhou's local publicity works. This paper takes *Beautiful China, Dynamic Huzhou* as the research object, builds a three-layer analysis framework guided by Relevance Theory, and concludes six practical translation methods via typical subtitle samples. The research results offer direct references for Huzhou's cross-cultural publicity translation. The paper covers theoretical interpretation, subtitle feature analysis, case discussion and concluding remarks.

2. Theoretical Framework

This chapter provides the theoretical foundation for the overall analysis. It first elaborates on the core connotations of Relevance Theory. On this basis, it constructs a three-dimensional analytical framework comprising cognitive context adaptation, ostensive-inferential optimization, and optimal relevance focus, thereby offering theoretical support for the subsequent discussion of subtitle translation methods.

2.1. Overview of Relevance Theory

Proposed by Sperber & Wilson, Relevance Theory defines communication as an ostensive-inferential act. Its core

communicative principle claims that all ostensive communication presupposes optimal relevance: audiences gain sufficient contextual effects with minimal processing effort [2].

Gutt pioneered the application of Relevance Theory to translation research [3]. He argued translation is dual cross-linguistic communication. Instead of rigidly copying linguistic form, translators' core task is to transmit original communicative intention matching target readers' cognitive reserves.

2.2. Three-Dimensional Analytical Framework

Combined with the unique limits of promotional subtitles, this study divides Relevance Theory into three progressive analytical dimensions:

First, cognitive context adaptation. Translators adjust text information to fit overseas audiences' cultural knowledge and lower their reasoning cost [3].

Second, ostensive-inferential optimization. Under strict character limits, translators are supposed to externalize implicit cultural connotations and lower target readers' comprehension barriers [4].

Third, optimal relevance focus. All translation choices aim to balance contextual effects and processing effort to realize cross-cultural optimal relevance [2].

3. Textual Features of Promotional Subtitles

The subtitles of *Beautiful China, Dynamic Huzhou* possess three prominent translation challenges:

First, abundant culture-loaded expressions. The text contains Huzhou historical sites, characteristic farming modes, classical poems and unique ecological concepts, forming obvious cross-cultural comprehension barriers.

Second, conciseness and accuracy demands. Screen subtitles cannot be lengthy; meanwhile official publicity texts must guarantee zero distortion of geographic, industrial and

historical information.

Third, emotional guidance function. Poetic parallel sentences and ancient verses create delicate aesthetic scenes, arousing foreign audiences' emotional identification with Huzhou's culture.

4. Subtitle Translation Methods under the Three-Dimensional Framework

This chapter matches six translation methods with the three dimensions of Relevance Theory, and analyzes typical subtitle samples to illustrate applicable scenarios of each translation strategy.

4.1. Methods for Cognitive Context Adaptation

This dimension focuses on matching overseas audiences' cognitive reserves. Literal translation and word-for-word translation suit universal information with shared cross-cultural cognitive basis^[5].

Literal translation retains original semantics and rhetoric while conforming to English syntax. As Newmark (1988) elaborates, literal translation retains core source-text semantics while making minor formal adjustments to fit target linguistic conventions^[5]. This method preserves source information integrity and reduces the audience's inferential effort by maintaining familiar cognitive structures.

Example:

Original:

湖州是“绿水青山就是金山银山”理念的重要发源地。

Translation: Huzhou is an important birthplace of the concept that “lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets”.

The translation retains the parallel structure and core imagery of the original quotation, and supplements “concept” and “birthplace” to complete the sentence structure. It enables overseas audiences to comprehend the ecological connotation literally, fully reflecting the effective transmission of universal ideological connotations under cognitive context adaptation.

Word-for-word translation focuses on achieving one-to-one correspondence at the lexical level, without considering overall syntactic differences. This method restores the lexical composition of the original, making it the most direct way to convey information.

Example:

Original: 美丽乡村。

Translation: beautiful countryside.

This translation strictly follows the word-for-word principle. As a universally acknowledged term with fixed lexical collocation in English, it achieves efficient transmission of basic developmental concept information under cognitive context adaptation.

4.2. Methods for Ostensive-Inferential Optimization

Poetic and culture-laden subtitles contain implicit connotations hard for foreign readers to grasp. Combined literal-free translation and paraphrase are used to make hidden meanings explicit^[4].

Combination of Literal and Free Translation retains core visual images and supplements implicit artistic conception through free translation. The literal component ensures the retention of concrete imagery, while the free component

bridges cultural gaps by making implicit contextual meanings explicit.

Example:

Original: 杏花春雨江南。

Translation: Poetic landscape of apricot blossoms and spring rain in the South of the Yangtze River.

As a classic artistic conception in traditional Chinese poetry, this phrase juxtaposes three cultural images. A rigid literal translation would only present isolated images without conveying the cohesive aesthetic mood. The translator retains the three core images literally and supplements “Poetic landscape” via free translation to integrate scattered images into a complete aesthetic scene, guiding overseas audiences to perceive the elegant charm of Jiangnan without mastering the background of Chinese classical poetry.

Paraphrase adopts explanatory rendering to explicate implicit cultural connotations instead of rigidly matching original wording. It is suitable for culturally loaded four-character phrases and allusions where a word-for-word transfer would create confusion.

Example:

Original: 八大新兴产业链比翼齐飞。

Translation: Eight emerging industrial chains are developing steadily.

The idiom “比翼齐飞” is a traditional Chinese literary allusion with metaphorical connotations, having no equivalent figurative expression in English. The paraphrased version abandons the original literary metaphor and directly interprets its implied meaning of simultaneous and coordinated development, removing cultural comprehension obstacles and clearly delivering the semantic implication of the idiom.

4.3. Methods for Optimal Relevance Focus

To balance audience processing effort and contextual effects, imitation and idiomatic translation are used for lyrical city publicity slogans^[5].

Imitation does not limit itself to the literal meaning or syntactic structures of the original, but instead takes the original as a sample—either condensing the core message or enriching it through supplementation. This method suits parallel structures and poetic expressions that need adaptation to subtitle time-space constraints.

Example:

Original: 那就是在湖州看见美丽中国。

Translation: That is to catch a glimpse of Beautiful China in Dynamic Huzhou.

The original is the core slogan of the promotional film, characterized by simplicity and emotional appeal. The translator uses imitation, expanding “看见” into “catch a glimpse of,” adding a poetic sense of fleeting discovery. The addition of “Dynamic” before Huzhou enhances the city's modern vibrancy. This transformation shifts the translation from a plain “see” to a more immersive “experience,” evoking emotional resonance while balancing effort and contextual effect to achieve optimal relevance.

Idiomatic translation delivers original meanings via natural target-language expressions.

Example:

Original: 它为长三角谋得一颗“绿心”。

Translation: It promotes green development for the Yangtze River Delta.

“绿心” is an ecological metaphor referring to Huzhou as

the ecological core of the Yangtze River Delta. A literal translation like "green heart" would confuse foreign audiences. The translator opts for "green development," a universally accepted international concept, to replace the metaphor. This eliminates potential confusion while accurately conveying Huzhou's role in ecological civilization.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Major Findings

Through case analysis above, three core research conclusions are summarized as follows.

Firstly, Relevance Theory has strong explanatory power for urban promotional subtitle translation, and its three-dimensional framework solves the conflict between cultural dissemination and readers' processing effort.

Secondly, six translation methods correspond to distinct theoretical dimensions: literal translation and word-for-word translation adapt to shared cognitive context; the combination of literal and free translation and paraphrase optimize ostensive reasoning; imitation and idiomatic translation realize optimal relevance.

Third, translators cannot apply one single method mechanically; flexible matching is required according to cultural load and subtitle technical constraints.

5.2. Limitations and Prospects

This study has certain limitations. First, the sample scope is limited to a single promotional film, so the generalizability

of the findings needs further verification. Second, the evaluation of translation methods relies primarily on qualitative analysis, lacking quantitative data and audience feedback to measure actual communication effects. Future research can expand the sample to include multiple Huzhou promotional films and introduce empirical methods such as surveys and interviews to provide more objective evidence for optimizing translation methods.

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