

A Study on the English-Chinese Subtitles Translation of the Movie “Manchester by the Sea” from the Perspective of Text Typology Theory

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ABSTRACT

Guided by Katharina Reiss’s text type theory, this paper conducts a study on the English-Chinese subtitles translation of the film “Manchester by the Sea” (2016). According to text type theory, the target text is judged by the transmission of the predominant function of the source text. This study analyzes the specific translation methods adopted for each text type, finding that text type theory provides a systematic approach to subtitles translation. This study also reveals the significance of punctuation translation. The findings of this study may have guiding significance for further translation practice.

Keywords: Text type theory, Subtitles translation, “Manchester by the Sea”, Informative text, Expressive text, Operative text.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the globalization era, the films have become one of the main media for cross-cultural communication. With the increasing popularity of foreign films in China, subtitles translation plays an important role in cross-cultural communication. Subtitles translation is not merely a simple language conversion; it is a complex process involving cultural adaptation and time limit. It is not easy to convey the inherent emotions of the original in another culture by translated subtitles.

“Manchester by the Sea” (2016) is directed by Kenneth Lonergan, which has won numerous prestigious international awards, including the Academy Award (89th, 2017) and the Golden Globe Award (74th, 2017). The film tells the story of Lee Chandler after a family tragedy. Unlike traditional films, there is no redemption after the tragedy; instead, the male protagonist is caught in grief and cannot free himself. The film’s realistic portrayal of sorrow has been widely praised, but its narrative style presents unique challenges to subtitles translation. Unlike commercial films with straightforward dialogues, “Manchester by the Sea” relies on implicit expressions and subtexts to convey complex emotions, requiring translators to

capture both the literal meaning of the original text and its emotional connotation.

This study aims to analyze the subtitles translation of “Manchester by the Sea” from the perspective of Katharina Reiss’s text type theory. It classifies the film’s subtitles into informative, expressive and operative types. On this basis, it further examines the translation methods adopted for different text types, and how the Chinese subtitles convey the meaning and profound emotional tone of the original film.

2. INTRODUCTION TO THE SUBTITLES TRANSLATION OF “MANCHESTER BY THE SEA”

Film subtitles translation is an important part of audiovisual translation. Its translation quality directly affects the transmission effectiveness of film information, emotional expression and cultural communication. As a representative realistic drama, the subtitles translation of “*Manchester by the Sea*” not only bears the common characteristics of general subtitles translation, but also contains unique features. To better analyze the subtitles translation of this film, the following part will firstly introduce the basic characteristics, restrictive

factors and core tasks of film subtitles translation, and then analyze the distinct characteristics of the subtitles translation of this film.

2.1 Brief Introduction to Films' Subtitles Translation

With the global development of film industries and cross-cultural communication, coupled with the popularity of streaming platforms, subtitles translation has become a key field in translation studies. While scholars have explored its core aspects (time limit, cultural adaptation, technical limitations, etc.), most studies focus on commercial blockbusters and sitcoms.

Gottlieb (1992) identified subtitles translation's unique features: strict time-space constraints, audio-visual synchronization, and the need for immediate audience understanding. Díaz-Cintas and Remael (2014) further emphasized balancing linguistic accuracy and readability, noting translators must simplify expressions to meet audience's instant reading needs under constraints.

AI and NLP technologies have boosted subtitles translation efficiency (e.g., DeepL, Subtitle Edit), but still struggle with idioms, slang, and emotional nuances (Massidda, 2023). Hybrid models (AI drafts + human post-editing) have emerged as a solution, combining automation efficiency with human precision in cultural and emotional transmission (Gao et al., 2025).

Subtitles translation differs from other translation types due to medium-imposed constraints: time-space limits (2-4 seconds per subtitle, 15-20 words per line), audio-visual synchronization, and special reception (audience processes images, sounds, and text simultaneously). Its core tasks are information transmission, emotional reproduction, and cultural communication—ensuring audience understanding, emotional resonance, and cross-cultural mutual understanding.

2.2 Characteristics of Subtitles Translation in "Manchester by the Sea"

This study focuses on the subtitle translation of the 2016 award-winning realistic drama "Manchester by the Sea", which fills the research gap in realistic drama subtitles translation with its typical linguistic and emotional features.

As a realistic drama, it differs from commercial works, focusing on human nature, trauma, and daily

warmth, with distinctive features suitable for research. Firstly, it adopts a restrained and implicit dialogue style: Protagonist Lee Chandler's short, fragmented lines (reflecting his depression) require translators to balance compression and emotional capture, as well as studying subtitles ellipsis and emotional reproduction. Secondly, it is full of authentic American colloquialisms and slangs, which make it ideal for studying oral language translation and register conversion under constraints. Thirdly, it boasts delicate emotions and rich subtexts. The literal and deep meanings often dislocate, requiring translators to grasp implicit emotions, which is suitable for researching emotional reproduction and pragmatic meaning transmission. Fourthly, it contains a great deal of life-oriented cultural elements: American small-town culture, family norms, funeral customs, etc., which provides a carrier for studying cultural adaptation methods (domestication vs. foreignization). Finally, it features a slow narrative rhythm: Sparse dialogues with loose subtitles display time but high information density, enabling comparison of translation methods between slow-paced literary films and fast-paced commercial ones.

The study on this kind of films' subtitles translation effectively fills the research gap, enhancing the study's innovation and providing new perspectives for subtitles translation research.

3. OVERVIEW OF TEXT TYPE THEORY

Text Type Theory, also known as text typology or Reiss's functional text typology, is an influential functional approach in translation studies put forward by the German translation scholar Katharina Reiss in the 1970s. Based on Karl Bühler's (1934/1965) tripartite classification of language functions – informative, expressive, and appellative – Reiss divides texts into three fundamental types according to their dominant communicative function. This marks a decisive move away from word or sentence level equivalence toward a function- and communication-oriented view of translation, where the overriding principle is the dominant function of the source text (Munday 2012: 112–115). Here are further explanations of the three text types:

First, informative texts focus on conveying factual content, logic, and objective information, such as news reports, scientific papers, technical manuals, and official documents. Their language is

plain, logical, and referential. According to Reiss, the translation should prioritize accuracy and completeness of information, using “plain prose” and employing explicitation when required, with form subordinate to meaning (Reiss, in Venuti 2000: 166–167).

Second, expressive texts center on the sender’s attitude, emotions, aesthetic form, and individual style, as found in literary works, poems, dramas, and lyrical prose. In this text type, the aesthetic dimension dominates, and the translation should adopt an “identifying” method, where the translator takes the standpoint of the source author to preserve artistic form, emotional tone, and stylistic individuality – even if this means sacrificing some semantic detail (Reiss, in Venuti 2000: 167).

Third, operative texts aim to persuade or appeal to the audience to take action, for example advertisements, political speeches, and publicity materials. Their language is dialogic and the focus is on the receiver. The translation should employ an “adaptive” method, producing an equivalent effect in the target audience (e.g., buying, believing, acting) and, if necessary, making cultural or linguistic adjustments to achieve that effect (ibid.).

Reiss also adds a fourth type – audio-visual texts (e.g., films, visual advertisements, songs) – which combine the three basic functions with visual images, music, and other non-verbal elements. Most texts are hybrid types. A biography might be somewhat between the informative and expressive types. It may even have an operative function in convincing the reader of the correctness of the subject’s actions. Taking “Manchester by the Sea” as an example, the film is predominantly expressive, with emotional, psychological, and stylistic features. At the same time, there is also informative function and operative function. Despite the existence of such hybrid types, Reiss states that “the transmission of the predominant function of the source text is the determining factor by which the target text is judged”. The target text of an informative text should transmit the full referential or conceptual content of the source text. The target text of an expressive text should transmit the aesthetic and artistic form of the source text. The target text of an operative text should produce the desired response in the target text receiver. Audio-medial texts require what Reiss calls the “supplementary” method, supplementing written words with visual images and music.

4. ANALYSIS OF SUBTITLES TRANSLATION IN “MANCHESTER BY THE SEA”

There are informative, expressive, and operative texts in the subtitles of this film. In the translation, the translator should convey the dominant function of each text type. What is also significant is the appropriate translation of punctuations in the film’s subtitles. Punctuation is an important tool for expressing language meaning, emotional tone, and syntactic structure, which plays a crucial role in distinguishing different text types and conveying the connotation of lines. Therefore, this study will select typical examples for each text type (informative, expressive, and operative), combined with audio-visual type and punctuations to conduct in-depth analysis, so as to explore the specific translation methods adopted for different text types.

4.1 Informative Text Translation

The informative texts in “Manchester by the Sea” mainly include descriptions of events, characters, and scenes, whose main communicative purpose is to convey factual information to the audience. Therefore, the translation of this text type should prioritize accuracy and clarity, focusing on conveying the basic information of the source text. The translation methods for informative texts include literal translation, simplification, and appropriate cultural adaptation when necessary.

Literal translation is the most commonly used strategy for informative texts, as it can ensure the accuracy and clarity of information transmission. Simplification is mainly used to deal with complex sentences or redundant expressions, improving the readability of subtitles considering time and space limit. Cultural adaptation is applied when there are cultural connotations that may cause misunderstandings in the target culture.

- Example 1:

ST: “The disease is commonly referred to as congestive heart failure... It’s a gradual deterioration of the muscles of the heart.”

TT: “这种病通常被称为充血性心力衰竭。它是心脏肌肉的逐渐退化。”

In the above example, the medical term “congestive heart failure” is rendered as “充血性心力衰竭”; the phrase “gradual deterioration” becomes “逐渐退化”, a Chinese medical equivalent. The primary function of this sentence is to convey objective facts about a disease. The sentence is

declarative and neutral. For such informative texts, accuracy and terminological correctness take priority over stylistic creativity, especially in subtitles where viewers need clear and concise information. Moreover, as audio-medial texts, the audience should view the film screen while reading the subtitles. Thus, the ST is rendered as two Chinese sentences, without any extra words which may prolong reading and affect keeping pace with the screen.

- Example 2:

ST: "I'm in charge of your finances until you turn 21."

TT: "二十一岁之前，你的财产都由我来管。"

This is a typical piece of legal/financial information, spoken by Lee when he explains the trust arrangement in his brother's will to his nephew Patrick. The primary function of the source text is to convey objective facts: an age limit (21 years old) and a scope of responsibility (financial control). The translator adopts a strategy of literal translation combined with word order adjustment. The phrase "in charge of your finances" is rendered as "你的财产都由我来管", which naturally expresses the idea of full control over assets. The time clause "until you turn 21" is moved to the front of the sentence, which conforms to Chinese syntactic conventions. The number "21" is accurately transferred as "二十一". As an audio-visual text, this line is also rendered in a clear and concise way.

- Example 3:

ST: "Eight over a seven-hour period"

TT: "七个小时喝了八瓶。"

There are two precise data in the ST: the quantity "eight" (bottles of beer) and the time duration "a seven-hour period". Although elliptical, the statement is informative, and its primary purpose is to convey numerical information. The translator adopts the strategy of explicitation and restructuring. The elliptical "Eight" is expanded to "八瓶" (eight bottles). The time phrase is restructured from post-position to preposition, and the verb "喝了" (drank) is added to make the meaning explicit.

- Example 4:

ST: "He's allowed up to \$5,000 to pay for moving expenses. And there's, uh... there's also a small amount set aside for, uh, you know, for you to draw from... as personal income."

TT: "他还拿出五千美元作为你的搬家费。你还有
一小笔钱可以支取，作为补贴。"

This example is taken from a will. Precision, clarity and accuracy are of great importance for informative legal content. Thus, "\$5,000" is rendered as "五千美元", "moving expenses" as "搬家费" and "personal income" as "补贴". As an audio-visual text, concision is needed when translating respecting time and space limit. The verb phrase "set aside for you to draw from" is rendered concisely as "可以支取". The expressions "uh...", "you know" are also omitted to make the TT concise.

4.2 Expressive Text Translation

The expressive texts in "Manchester by the Sea" mainly include emotional dialogues and inner monologues. The communicative purpose of this text type is to reflect the characters' emotional and psychological activities. Therefore, the TT should convey the same emotional function as the ST. The translation methods such as free translation, colloquialization are adopted. Meanwhile, the proper use of punctuations also plays a key role in conveying subtle emotions.

Free translation is adopted when literal translation cannot convey the emotions of the source text. Colloquialization is used to adapt to the informal style of the film, making the translation fluent and idiomatic. The translator should ensure that the target audience can experience the same emotional feelings as the source audience. Punctuations, such as ellipses, periods, and commas, are properly used to reflect the characters' emotions.

- Example 5:

ST: "I can't beat it. I'm sorry."

TT: "我走不出来，对不起。"

This is one of the most typical lines in the film, expressing Lee's deep sense of guilt and inability to overcome his past trauma. The literal translation of "I can't beat it" would be "我不能打败它", which fails to convey the emotions of the source text. Thus, a free translation strategy is adopted, using the Chinese colloquial expression "我过不去这坎", which means an insurmountable psychological barrier and accurately shows Lee's emotional struggle.

- Example 6:

ST: "My heart was broken. It's always going to be broken. And I know yours is broken, too."

TT: “我的心碎了，永远都不会好了。我知道你的心也碎了。”

The metaphor “broken heart” appeared three times. The TT translated the metaphor as “心碎了”，which is also a metaphor with the same meaning in Chinese. The phrase “永远都不会好了” (it will never get better) in the TT adds a sense of irreparable decay that is not literally in “always going to be broken”，but it conveys the emotions properly. Expressive texts often allow some interpretive liberty to convey the same expressive function. As for the sentence length of the TT, it properly fits the characteristics of audio-visual texts.

- Example 7:

ST: “So happy. It was like when we took the girls on the merry-go-round. I mean, it was just pure happiness.”

TT: “太开心了，就像我们带女儿去坐旋转木马一样，那是纯粹的开心。”

In this example, Lee recalls a rare moment of pure joy—his son catching a fish. The translation renders “pure happiness” as “纯粹的开心”，a direct equivalent. The “merry-go-round” is rendered as “旋转木马”. No adaptation is needed here because the image is universal.

From the perspective of audio-visual text characteristics, this line is spoken slowly, with a soft, nostalgic tone. The ST consists of three sentences, and there are pauses between them as Lee drifts into memory. The Chinese translation follows the same rhythm: three clauses, each of moderate length (4, 12, and 7 characters respectively). As the audience reads the subtitles, they simultaneously see Lee’s distant, melancholic gaze, which reinforces the warmth of the memory. The translator’s decision to maintain a relaxed reading pace allows the audience to fully absorb the emotional tone without feeling rushed, thus preserving the expressive function.

4.3 Operative Text Translation

The operative texts intend to persuade, urge, or elicit responses from the listener. The communicative purpose of this type is to achieve a specific pragmatic effect, prompting the listener to take action or generate the desired emotional reaction. Therefore, to figure out the operative effect on the target audience is crucial. Then the translator should find a proper Chinese equivalent to convey the same operative effect. The translation

methods such as the use of persuasive language and cultural adaptation are often used.

Persuasive language is used to emphasize the urgency or importance of the message, prompting the listener to take action. Cultural adaptation helps to make the translation more in line with the cultural habits and cognitive characteristics of the target audience, enhancing the resonance and persuasiveness of the lines.

- Example 8:

ST: “Keep your thumb off the line, because if you get a strike, it’s gonna slice it right open.”

TT: “别把你的大拇指放在鱼线上，因为如果有鱼上钩，鱼线就会直接把手指割破。”

In this example, Lee warns Patrick while teaching him to fish. The imperative “Keep your thumb off” directly asks the listener to change his behavior. The cause-effect explanation reinforces the warning. The TT uses the negative imperative “别放” (don’t put), which conforms to the Chinese language conventions. The consequence “slice it right open” is rendered as “直接把手指割破” (directly cut the finger open), which is vivid but not exaggerated. Appellative texts require the translator to preserve both the directive force and the persuasive logic.

From the perspective of audio-visual texts, this line is spoken while the characters are actively holding fishing rods, with the visual action of casting and reeling. The original sentence is spoken in a brisk, cautionary way. The Chinese translation is longer but can be split into two subtitle lines, namely, “别把你的大拇指放在鱼线上”，and “因为如果有鱼上钩，鱼线就会直接把手指割破”. Each can be displayed in approximately 2–2.5 seconds, which matches the actor’s speaking speed. The negative imperative “别放” appears at the beginning, catching the audience’s attention immediately. The vivid consequence “直接把手指割破” is short, reinforcing the urgency. By using concise, action-oriented language and splitting the sentence at a natural break, the translator respects the time limit while preserving the directive force. The subtitle is synchronized with the visual action, allowing the audience to connect the words with the demonstrated danger.

- Example 9:

ST: “Would you excuse me, Lee, one sec?”

TT: “我先失陪一下，就一会儿。”

The English uses conventional politeness formulas. The Chinese equivalent “失陪一下” is equally appropriate and idiomatic. Appellative texts often rely on culturally specific routines; the translator finds the natural counterpart in the target language rather than translating word-for-word.

From the perspective of audio-visual text characteristics, this line is spoken quickly and informally, as part of a casual social interaction. The ST contains 6 words; the TT has 8 characters, which can be displayed as a single subtitle line. The reading time is approximately 1.5 seconds, within the typical 2-second limit. The choice of the Chinese formula “失陪一下” is idiomatic and culturally efficient. It conveys the full meaning in minimal space. The subtitle is synchronized with the spoken words and the characters’ movement. By using a short and idiomatic expression, the translator ensures that the operative function is achieved.

- Example 10:

ST: "Can I give you a tip?" (with a note in the subtitle indicating a double meaning: money or advice)

TT: “我能给你一点小费[小建议]吗?”

This line is spoken by a female tenant who is flirting with Lee. The word "tip" has a double meaning – gratuity (money) or piece of advice. The appeal lies in the playful ambiguity, inviting Lee to respond to either meaning. The translation uses the bracketed addition “[小建议]” after “小费” to explicitly mark the pun. Without this, the Chinese word “小费” only means money tip, losing the ambiguity. In this example, the translator added explanatory elements to preserve the original communicative effect.

The TT of “Manchester by the Sea” demonstrates several distinct advantages: a high level of accuracy; brevity and concision; idiomaticity and fluency.

Despite the obvious merits, the TT also has some unavoidable limitations: on the one hand, some cultural connotations in the ST are lost in the TT, which decreases the cultural richness of the ST. On the other hand, in order to adapt to Chinese language habits, some stylistic features of the ST have been adjusted, which may reduce the aesthetic beauty of the ST. Moreover, the time limit of subtitles translation sometimes force translators to simplify or omit certain details, which makes the connotation of the ST not fully conveyed.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper adopts Katharina Reiss’s text type theory as a framework to study the English-Chinese subtitles translation of “Manchester by the Sea”. The subtitles are classified into informative, expressive, and operative types, each requiring different translation methods.

Informative texts in the film mainly describe events, characters, and settings. The primary function is to convey information accurately. The translator usually adopts literal translation to maintain the accuracy and clarity of the ST. Expressive texts in the film mainly include emotional dialogues and inner monologues. The TT should capture the emotional tone and stylistic features of the original. The translator uses free translation and colloquialization to convey the emotional connotation. Operative texts, though fewer in number, serve important functions such as persuading or provoking a reaction. The translator mainly uses persuasive language and cultural adaptation to ensure effective communication.

In conclusion, the text type theory offers translators a systematic basis for selecting appropriate translating methods according to different text types. This study may serve as valuable reference for the future translation of similar films.

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