

Applying Functional Equivalence Theory to the Subtitle Translation of “NeZha 2”

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Abstract:

Based on Eugene Nida's functional equivalence theory and taking into account the temporal-spatial limitations and multimodal features inherent in film and television subtitling, this study methodically investigates the translation strategies of the English subtitles for “NeZha 2.” According to studies, the film effectively handles culturally diverse components and emotionally charged speech by employing approaches such as creative translation, cultural adaptation, and re-creation to achieve functional equivalency. This film stresses audience reception in the target language while keeping cultural authenticity over its predecessor, “Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Boy.” It optimizes translation expression through techniques like rhythmic restructuring, imagery conversion, and emotional resonance. Overseas audience feedback indicates that the subtitles effectively conveyed core emotions and spiritual essence, though barriers remained in understanding certain culturally loaded terms. Based on this, this paper proposes that Chinese film subtitle translation should establish a strategy system oriented toward cultural communication and centered on emotional resonance, seeking a balance between cultural fidelity and audience reception to enhance the global dissemination effectiveness of Chinese stories.

Keywords: Functional Equivalence Theory, Subtitle Translation, NeZha 2, Cultural Proprietary Items, Multimodal Translation

1. Introduction

The Chinese animated film NeZha 2 was released during the 2025 Spring Festival. It is a sequel to the 2019 box office hit Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Boy. The film succeeded well in China and received a lot of attention across the world. According to public data, NeZha 2 is the world's highest-grossing animat-

ed film. Its box office has surpassed 12.9 billion yuan. This achievement stems from two major factors. One is its stunning images and profound concepts. The other is excellent subtitle translation, which is essential for cross-cultural communication. Right now, systematic research on NeZha 2 subtitle translation is just being started. Existing research primarily focuses on assessing particular lines or providing general

scores. They lack a thorough analysis based on theoretical frameworks.

To address this, this study integrates multimodal translation theory with temporal and spatial constraints. It develops an analytical framework using functional equivalence theory. Then, it carefully examines NeZha 2's English subtitles to determine how effectively functional equivalency is accomplished. The study also compares its results to previous research. It looks for ways to improve Chinese movie subtitle translations. This can provide theoretical references for improving the efficacy of cultural communication.

2. Functional Equivalence and the Theoretical Framework for Subtitle Translation

2.1 Core Principles of Functional Equivalence Theory

American translation theorist Eugene Nida came up with the functional equivalency idea. The goal of translation, according to this idea, is not just to match languages. It is to achieve functional equivalency between the source language and the target language.

This notion says one thing clearly: the target audience's understanding and reaction to the translated content should be as close as possible to the original audience's experience. Functional equivalency has four levels. They are lexical, syntactic, discursive and stylistic. When form and content conflict, the idea puts first the accurate delivery of meaning.

Nida also proposed a three-step translation process. The steps are semantic-cultural adaptation, formal selection and creative adaptation. This process gives methodological guidance to handle cultural differences.

2.2 Characteristics of Film and Television Subtitle Translation

Movie and TV show subtitle translation has limits from time and space. Temporally, it needs to match how fast the characters speak. Geographically, it must follow the rules of screen display.

Subtitles are a kind of multimodal text. They have to work with audio, visual images and other parts to create and pass on meaning. Klaus Kaindl's multimodal theory supports this idea. The theory says: when the language modality can not finish communicative tasks alone, other modalities must make up for it. Besides, subtitles are informal and don't last long. So translations must use common ways of speaking and be easy to understand right

away.

2.3 Theoretical Integration and Practical Pathways

To use functional equivalence theory in subtitle translation practice, you need to set up a multi-tiered objective system.

First, make sure key information is passed on accurately. This has to be done within the limits of time and space—this is called information equivalence.

Second, deal with culturally specific elements properly. You should avoid misunderstandings and keep as many cultural characteristics as possible—this is cultural equivalence.

Third, recreate the characters' emotional states and the persuasive power of the dialogue—this is stylistic equivalence.

To reach these goals, you need to use tactics together. These tactics include simplification, compression, explicitation, and substitution. For different cultural components, you should use different methods. These methods are literal translation, free translation, transliteration, and creative translation.

3. Analysis of Cultural Transmission Effectiveness and Audience Reception in the Subtitle Translation of 'NeZha 2'

3.1 Translation Strategies for Cultural Proprieties and Their Communication Effects

The treatment of cultural proprieties in the film demonstrates a pronounced shift toward functional equivalence. Take the Taoist incantation "Ji Ji Ru Lv Ling" as an example. Its translation evolved from the literal rendering "be quick to obey my command" in previous adaptations to the creative adaptation "swift and uplift," reflecting a progression from surface correspondence to functional equivalence. However, scholarly commentary notes: "The translation of 'Ji Ji Ru Lv Ling' as 'swift and uplift' sacrifices mystical gravitas for brevity, diluting the Taoist context." This indicates that while pursuing conciseness, the translation weakened the incantation's inherent mystique and cultural resonance.

In contrast, translations of mythical figures and magical artifacts achieved better balance. "Tai yi zhen ren" was rendered as "Master Taiyi," employing a phonetic transcription with an honorific to preserve cultural identity while clarifying the character's status; "Feng Huo Lun" was directly translated as "Wind Fire Wheels," effectively

conveying cultural imagery through visual modality. As one international viewer commented on Reddit: “As a Western viewer, I struggled with concepts like the ‘Jade Void Palace’ or ‘Wind Fire Wheels,’ but the emotional core kept me engaged.”

3.2 *Achieving Emotional Transmission and Thematic Resonance*

The film excels in handling emotionally charged dialogue, significantly enhancing its cross-cultural impact. Nezha’s core line “Wo ming you wo bu you tian.” is translated as “I am the master of my own fate!” This concise, powerful English expression accurately conveys the theme of defying destiny. Such translation strategies make “Nezha’s rebellion against fate universally relatable,” as one Rotten Tomatoes user remarked: “I was moved to tears by his journey.”

The portrayal of familial bonds proved equally successful. As *The Times* noted: “The mother-son bond, especially when she embraces him despite his painful transformation, is heart-wrenching and universal.” This demonstrates that the subtitles achieved high functional equivalence on an emotional level, enabling profound resonance across diverse cultural backgrounds.

3.3 *Overseas Audience Feedback and Translation Strategy Evolution*

Building on prior experience, the translation strategy for “NeZha 2” demonstrated significant refinement. Overseas audience feedback highlighted: “The sequel’s subtitles feel more natural, with fewer literal translations and better emotional punch.” “This progress stems from enhanced cultural adaptation, as one gamer noted, ‘Having played ‘Black Myth: Wukong,’ I was familiar with terms like ‘72 Transformations,’ which made watching Nezha 2 easier.’” However, comprehension barriers due to cultural differences persist. One review observed: “The film oscillates between frenetic, flashy, and juvenile, making it emotionally inaccessible. Cultural references like Taoist incantations or crude humor felt alienating.” This highlights the ongoing challenge of balancing cultural fidelity with audience accessibility when handling culturally specific elements.

Professional reviews affirm this optimization direction. As *ScreenAnarchy* noted: “Subtitles for phrases like ‘I am the master of my fate’ effectively convey the protagonist’s defiance, though some cultural nuances are inevitably lost.” This assessment validates the subtitles’ success in conveying core emotions while highlighting room for improvement in handling cultural details.

Overall, “NeZha 2” achieves an effective balance between

cultural transmission and audience reception through innovative translation strategies. Its experience demonstrates that culturally rich Chinese narratives can resonate globally through appropriate functional equivalence translation, offering valuable insights for the international dissemination of future works.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1 *Research Findings*

This study used the functional equivalence framework to analyze Ne Zha 2’s subtitle translation systematically. It reached the following conclusions.

First, when dealing with culturally specific items, the film used multiple translation strategies flexibly. This helped pass on cultural elements effectively. But some terms with strong cultural meanings—like Taoist incantations—still need improvement.

Second, emotional dialogue achieved cross-cultural resonance successfully. This was achieved through restructuring sentences and recreating rhetorical devices.

Finally, compared with its predecessor, this film shows a trend. It keeps optimizing the balance between cultural fidelity and audience reception.

4.2 *Practical Recommendations*

Based on these findings, here are recommendations for Chinese film subtitle translation.

First, set up a translation philosophy focused on cultural communication. It should keep cultural distinctiveness while making the content more acceptable to audiences.

Second, value emotional resonance more than literal word-for-word translation. Use language methods to strengthen emotional expression.

Third, make full use of multimodal synergy. This helps linguistic and non-linguistic elements complement each other.

Fourth, build professional translation teams. These teams should bring together cultural specialists, native-speaking translators, and film professionals.

4.3 *Research Prospects*

This study has three main limitations. First, the film was released not long ago, so there is not much feedback data from overseas audiences. Second, this study only focuses on the English subtitle version. Third, it has not yet done dynamic analysis of audiovisual coordination.

Future research can take three directions. It may expand comparative analysis across multiple languages. It can use experimental methods to measure how audiences accept

the subtitles. It can also try to build intelligent analysis models to deepen multimodal translation studies.

The subtitle translation of *Ne Zha 2* offers valuable experience for Chinese films to go global. Chinese films are having more influence around the world. Strengthening systematic and professional research on subtitle translation will help spread Chinese stories to the world effectively.

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