



## The Application of Functional Equivalence Into Subtitle Translation—Taking *The Legend of 1900* as an Example

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### Abstract

In 1995, subtitle translation of film and translation became an independent translation field in the translation system. Audiovisual translation can help target audience to comprehend the contents of source language movies better and to acquire the best reaction across all movies, so audiovisual translation is really significant. However, it's a pity that few translators pay attention to subtitle translation of China. This text takes the Chinese and English version of *The legend of 1900* as an example, and it is analyzed and demonstrated from words and sentences level, cultural level and the tone of roles level. Therefore, we can analyze how to apply functional equivalence which is proposed by Eugene A. Nida into the subtitle translation. Meanwhile, we also demonstrate the feasibility and importance of the functional equivalence in audiovisual translation.

**Key words:** *The Legend of 1900*; Functional equivalence; Subtitle translation

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### INTRODUCTION

With the development of globalization, the speed and frequency of communication among countries are accelerating rapidly. Of all the communicative means,

translation is playing a significant role in economic and cultural exchange and cooperation, so that translation research has been developed enormously in recent decades. It mainly includes literary translation, science and technology translation, audio-visual translation, machine translation and others. Among them, audiovisual translation as an emerging research area was defined an independent research field in 1995. In fact, IFT (International Federation of Translator) can be regarded as the earliest academic organization realizing the important academic position the audiovisual translation occupied in the world. In 1987, this organization established a Committee for Media Translators and Interpreters to discuss issues about translation and interpretation of the media. Besides the awareness of these academic organizations, the support of European Union and the rapid development of new techniques promote further development of translation studies in the West, and the Western scholars attach more importance to perfect theories of audiovisual translation, because the development of audiovisual translation theories is favorable in bettering the whole frame in translation theory.

However, in China, there are just a few scholars delving into audiovisual translation. From the earliest silent films to real dubbed film, Chinese audience has already been accustomed to watch original English films with Chinese subtitles. Besides, in our modern life, there is an increasing number of target audiences who watch dubbed film, compared with those who read literary translation works, so in some sense audiovisual translation is exerting an influence as literary translation. With regard to the fact that scholars in the translation field pay more attention to literary translation, attention should be called for the audiovisual translation.

### 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 1.1 The Concept of Equivalence

Born in America in 1914, Eugene A. Nida impressed

the world as a famous linguist and translator, the most influential one among contemporary theorists in the translation field in the last century. His theory—functional equivalence made a great contribution to translation studies in the western countries. This theory came from the concept of dynamic equivalence which was mentioned in *Toward a Science of Translating*:

In such a translation (dynamic equivalent translation) one is not so concerned with matching the receptor-language message with the source message, but with the dynamic relationship, that the relationship between receptor and message should be substantially the same as that which existed between the original receptors and the message. (Nida, 1964, p.159)

However, Nida defined the theory of dynamic equivalence as an idea that “the translator should translate so that the effect of the translation on the target reader is roughly the same as the effect of the source text once was on the source reader” (Nida & Charles, 1969, p.45). This statement can clearly convey the essence of his theory that dynamic equivalence is reader-oriented.

In 1984, Nida wrote a famous book: *From One Language to Another*. In this book, he proposed that the functional equivalence is better than dynamic equivalence in the field of translation. Therefore, the theory of functional equivalence was further developed. In 1990s, functional equivalence was divided into two levels: one is the maximal level; the other, the minimal level. Today, when translators use this theory in a translation, translators should know they need to focus more on readers’ feeling instead of the source message itself. Meanwhile, in order to comprehend source texts, the dynamic equivalence requires that a complete and natural expression translating be used so that it doesn’t need readers to learn other countries’ cultural patterns of source-language context. Besides, Eugene A. Nida put forward another significant theory known as formal equivalence..

In contrast with functional equivalence, formal equivalence is text-oriented. It requires people to pay attention to forms and contents of the message. According to the theory, during the process of translating, people should notice correspondences as poetry to poetry, sentence to sentence and concept to concept. All these can be reflected in source-text words, grammar and syntactic structures. Thus, it requests translators to possess excellent translating competence and they should try to

reproduce as literally and meaningfully as possible both form and content of the original, and the reader is permitted to identify himself as fully as possible with a person in the source-language context, and to understand as much as he can the customs, manner of thought and means of expression. (Nida, 1964, p.159)

Therefore, a formal equivalent translation is a literal but meaningful translation. In fact, formal equivalent translation and functional equivalent translation are just different types of translation, but instead they adjust different situations of translation respectively.

As for audiovisual translation, compared with formal equivalence, dynamic equivalence is more suitable for audiovisual translation.

## 1.2 Characteristics of Subtitle Translation

Unlike the language of prose or poetry, the film and television language has its own special characteristics: immediacy, popularity and colloquialism.

In these characteristics, immediacy is the most important. There is an example to state the importance of immediacy: One can read a novel or poetry again and again if he thinks that this text is difficult to comprehend at the first sight. However, on the contrary, when we watch a film or TV drama, it’s impossible to watch the same scene twice at the same time because there is generally no chance for second hearing. Thus, it requires translators to use simple words explaining complicated situations in order that the target audience can understand source-language film effortlessly.

In addition, popularity is an essential characteristic in subtitle translation. As an emerging field of translation, audiovisual translation has fewer limitations than other literary forms such as poetry, prose, novel and so on. The appearance of movie and television is just for general public, and it belongs to a popular form of art. Therefore, except a few experimental film, most film and TV dramas are created just for people to enjoy. Therefore, the language of film and television must well meet public audience of different levels and background. Those with good education usually can understand the translation version of poetry or novel with the sentence structure of the source language, so they can comprehend most forms of translation versions like poetry, prose or novel, all these having serious art forms. As for men with less schooling or illiteracy, it is difficult for them to understand a complicated translation version. Hence, when doing a subtitle translation, translators need to use straightforward forms. As an eligible translator, one should have the awareness that the receptor of the target language in audiovisual translation is the general public. The feature of popularity has a close relationship with immediacy.

Besides two characteristics, colloquialism is another significant one for subtitle translation. As dialogue is the main part of a film, movie language is more colloquial. It is different than those works which include a great deal of descriptions or narrations. Film is supposed to reflect people’s daily life and express emotion, so it is hard to arouse people’s resonance if translation employs less common words. Therefore, translators need to use colloquial words and simple sentences to translate films.

## 1.3 The Constraints of Audiovisual Translation

It is known that here is a close connection between characteristics and constraints. Main constraints for audiovisual translation include the limit of space, the limit of time and the limit of culture.

Subtitles of a film are usually put at the bottom of screen in order to reduce, to the largest extent, the influence of an art effect on film and television. Therefore, the space occupied by the subtitle should be restricted into one or two lines. Meanwhile, the target language needs to have the same length as the source language. Accordingly, it is clear that the limit of space makes the subtitle translation concise and explicit.

Then, there exists another constraint: the limit of time. For the translation of film dialogue, it requires that every translated word or sentence should match the source language of film dialogue correspondingly. In other words, subtitle insertion should start with and end with the finish of the voice. Thus, a subtitle translator must notice every protagonist's dialogue he needs to work on, as he can't translate a long English sentence into a short Chinese.

The limit of culture is the most thought-provoking and significant one for audiovisual translation. Film and television communication is not only a recreational activity, but also a cultural exchange among countries, so we need to think about cross-cultural factors in translation. Thus, audiovisual translation is not only the exchange between two different languages, but also involves introducing other cultures to China in an easy way so that Chinese can accept them. We must deal with the relationship between the source language culture and the target language culture when we research the subtitle translation, because a good translator is a mediation of cultural transmission, and his chief goal is promoting exchange among different cultures and overcoming cultural differences.

In a word, the main purpose of audiovisual translation is to transmit language and cultural information of film and television works. Furthermore, it is also for achieving works' aesthetic and business value, with a view to attracting audience in a great degree. Therefore, a good command of knowledge of characteristics and constraints benefit translators to complete the translation tasks, and the cognition of them can further stimulate culture exchange and integration among different countries and ethnic groups.

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## 2. THE ANALYSIS AND COMPARISON OF THE CHINESE AND ENGLISH VERSIONS ABOUT THE MOVIE *THE LEGEND OF 1900* FROM THE FUNCTIONAL EQUIVALENCE THEORY

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### 2.1 The Brief Introduction About the Movie *The Legend of 1900*

The film narrates a pianist's entire life. At the beginning of the twentieth century, an orphan was abandoned in the

first class cabin on the luxury cruise ship—Virginia. He was raised by a sailor who gave him a name: 1900. In 1900 grew up, he gradually presented his self-taught and extraordinary gift of playing the piano. Then he began to play the piano in the band of the cruise ship since he grew to manhood, and people who listened to his music were all moved. However, it was a pity that all these happened on the ocean, because 1900 never set foot on dry land. Until one day, he fell in love with a girl, and that was the first time he wanted to leave this ship, but he finally gave up this decision. He didn't leave this ship as if he didn't allow his music to leave himself. Eventually, he chose to end up his life with "Virginia", leaving this world which didn't belong to him.

### 2.2 The Analysis About the Movie *The Legend of 1900* Between the Chinese Version and English Version

Functional equivalence pay more attention to the responses of readers, and it also means that translators should focus on audience's feeling in film and television translation. Thus, for translators, they should notice when the target language audience watches the film and film subtitle, whether they can produce the same reaction with the source language audience. Therefore, from the viewpoint of functional equivalence, movie analysis can be explored from different aspects. American movie—*The legend of 1900* which was released in October 1998—made a big splash all over the west since 1998, so did it in China. Thus, many Chinese versions about this movie produced by various subtitle translation groups have appeared on the internet now. But some of them can be treated as abusive translation. Now, I will analyze the subtitle translation from three aspects by using functional equivalence.

From the lexical perspective, Nida used to point out that the interpretation for lexeme always has existed the potential possibility. Different ethnic groups possess different cultural background, so there are much misunderstanding or distortion in cultural exchange, especially in film and television translation. Some words or sentences can not reach "faithfulness" if translators ignore their hidden meanings and translate them directly, but it is hard for the audience to comprehend the real meaning. Therefore, we should notice the film's context and plots so that we will be able to adjust words and sentences to fit the real context and situations under the guide of functional equivalence.

Example One: Come on now, Yank, who the devil is playing?

Literal meaning: 说吧, 这弹奏的魔鬼是谁?

Subtitle translation group: 这弹琴的人究竟是谁?

Max who was the best friend of 1900 wanted to sell his trumpet to earn money for a living. After finishing this deal, he started to play the trumpet last time to recall the

past. And the melody he played was the song made up by 1900. What amazed him was that the boss of the video store owned this music record which shouldn't be there, and the boss also felt astonished because he held that no one knew this melody. Thus, there was a dialogue in the scene:

--- I can't work out who this amazing piano player is.

--- I don't think you've ever heard of him.

--- Who is he?

--- If I told you that this pianist never existed, I wouldn't be lying.

--- I don't like secrets. Come on now, Yank, who the devil is playing?

According to this dialogue, we can see that the boss of the secondhand video store is really curious about who played this amazing tune. He begins to ask Max, but he does not get the answer until the third time. We can find there is a change that the boss changes the appellation of 1900. The first time, the boss calls him "this amazing player"; the second time is "he" and the third time is "the devil". Therefore, according to this change, we can clearly learn he is very curious and a little bit angry when he asks this question for the third time. If we translate it directly, the audience may not know what is said. Besides, translators also add a word—"究竟", which can express the current mood of that boss.

Example Two: You read like a god

Literal meaning: 你读得就像上帝一样

Subtitle translation group: 你念得太棒了

This part is very warm and sweet. 1900, an orphan, was raised by old Danny. Old Danny regarded 1900 as his biological son, and he paid all his efforts to bring up 1900. One day, Old Danny was hit by a rough chain with iron hook, it took three days for Old Danny to go. This part below happened just a few days before his death.

--- Push your finger against these words, so the letters can't run off on you!

--- "Man"

--- All right, keep going

--- "Go", "Ma"

--- Just a little bit more

--- "Ma"

--- Boy, you read like a god, Lemon!

This scene is that old Danny is teaching 1900 how to read. Although 1900 can't read them out at once, old Danny still keeps the patient. In addition, 1900 can only read the half of a complete word, such as a word "Mango". He needs to a pause to finish this word, then that becomes "man", "go". Of course, when 1900 stops, old Danny always encourages him to go on. All these performances illustrate that old Danny loves this little child deeply. Then, 1900 begins to read the word "Mama", when he reads "ma", old Danny said that just a little bit

more immediately. In fact, at that time, 1900 doesn't know what the meaning of "Mama" is, but old Danny does. In Danny's mind, he is 1900's father and mother, but he never requires 1900 to call him father, so he is very happy and moved after listening to 1900 reading out the word "Mama". Thus, there is a big possibility to translate "like a god" directly if we ignore the context and the protagonist's feeling, an abusive translation which will be. This sentence: "You read like a god." contains old Danny's exciting mood, and that expresses her wish to praise and encourage 1900, so it could not be better to translate it into "你念得太棒了".

The second aspect is the cultural level. Each film is the historical, social and cultural reflection in a certain cultural field, so film dialogues always contain some certain cultural information including special cultural background, which is called cultural-loaded words. As we all know different countries have different cultures, so if we directly translate those dialogues that involve different backgrounds and cultural knowledge, it will be difficult for the audience to comprehend the real meaning of film. Therefore, cultural factors of source language should be transformed to equivalent words with target language's cultural factors.

In these cultural factors, the most influential factor is the use of slang. We are always at a loss when we watch them in movies, because slang cover many hidden meanings that we can't understand if translators cannot translate the real meaning. Thus, we can clearly know these hidden meanings exclusively belong to their own country's culture.

There are some examples of *The legend of 1900* as follows:

Two peas in a pod, wouldn't you say.

几乎一模一样, 你说是吧

You are not the sharpest knife in the drawer.

你可不够聪明

Because I'm the horse's arse who has to throw that switch.

因为我就是那个握有生杀大权的人

1900 is the ivory tickler on the seven seas.

1900是七大洋上最伟大的钢琴家

These are all slangs. Without the cultural background, it's hard for us to comprehend what are the real meanings. In our daily life, slangs plays a significant role in our general language. It's sure that foreigners who are regarded as native speakers must be good at using slangs. Actually, these foreign slangs mentioned above are equal to Chinese common sayings, such as "old sin makes new shame (一失足成千古恨)" or "Once bitten, twice shy" (一朝被蛇咬, 十年怕井绳). Therefore, many movies no matter native films or foreign films like to use slangs in order to arise the source language audience's resonance. However, these slangs will confuse the target language audience.

In *The Legend of 1900*, many slangs are used in this film to improve its aesthetic value. For example, “the ivory tickler” means “最伟大的钢琴家”, which might be easy for native speakers to understand it. As for foreign audience, they might know what the meaning of “ivory” is, but I guess most of them don’t know the meaning of “tickler”. Meanwhile, according to functional equivalence, translators can transform the cultural connotation of the source-text into words of the target language to state and illustrate, so as to reach the meaning equivalence between the source language and the target language. Hence, translators know “ivory” means “象牙”, and in the West, people use ivory to symbolize a fantastic and isolated world. 1900 never sets foot on the dry land. He is isolated in a sense, and he also possesses the gift of playing the piano, so this word-“ivory” is very suitable. And the word, tickler, is familiar to native speakers, because in the slang, it means pianist. Therefore, translators translating into “最伟大的钢琴家” can fully show the feeling that the movie wants to express and make Chinese audience understand its meaning better.

The last aspect is the style of speaking. Film and television language are mainly made up by dialogues of characters. As mentioned in the literature review, colloquialism is one Characteristics, so we need to pay more attention to film’s tones of roles in order to clarify the intricate character relations. When we watch *The Legend of 1900*, we can notice that for different people, translators use different tones to express their personalities. There are two examples of *The legend of 1900* as follows:

Example One:

Who does the little ape get instead?

看看是谁捡到了这小鬼

What are you going to call the nino?

你打算叫这小鬼什么

You aren’t as dumb as you look, colored boy!

你没外表看起来那么蠢嘛, 黑小子

Example Two:

Winter comes and you can’t wait for summer, summer comes and you live in dread of winter. That’s why you never tire of traveling. Always Chasing someplace far away where it’s always summer. Doesn’t sound like a good bet to me.

冬天来临时, 巴望这夏天, 夏天到来时, 就已经开始害怕冬天, 这就是为什么人们总是在害怕旅行. 他们总是在追寻四季如春的远方, 可那样的生活不适合我.

The two examples are workers and 1900 respectively. Those workers have lower social position, so their tones are full of vulgar words. We know the little child is 1900 through this movie, but in the first example, workers call 1900 for “the little ape” and “the nino”, and old Danny calls those workers for “colored boy”. All those words

are coarse, which the upper class will never say. Thus, translators translate these words into “小鬼, 黑小子” to be in line with the real situation of the speakers in this film.

On the contrary, what 1900 said in the second example is very gentle and warm. When Max asks 1900 why he changes his mind leaving this ship, 1900 says so along with the soothing music played at the same time. It attempts to express not only that 1900 is afraid of the dry land that he never sets foot in, but also that he doesn’t expect to step into the land and feel regretful with this decision. Translators, try to understand this scene, and the words they translated also need to accord with the character of 1900, so the Chinese version of this part is very graceful. Thus, the audience can appreciate these words and have the feeling that they just stay on that scene.

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## CONCLUSION

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Subtitle translation requires that the target language audience have the same feeling as the audience have the capacity of understanding and appreciation towards this movie and the reaction of watching this movie with the source language audience. Meanwhile, functional equivalence also emphasizes that the understanding of translation versions on the target readers is the same as the effect of the source-text version on the source readers. It chances that the requirement of functional equivalence is in accord with the demand of subtitle translation. Therefore, it is feasible and essential for translators to apply the theory of functional equivalence for the subtitle translation. According to the native and foreign language’s characteristics and cultural backgrounds, translators have the responsibilities to fully understand the connotation of films and to neatly deal with places which should be reserved or changed. Through the analysis of the subtitle translation about *The legend of 1900* and the cognition of different characteristics between the source language and the target language, we learn that translators should combine the customs, cultural backgrounds and other translation skills to translate a work.

In a word, during the process of translation, translators will meet many difficult problems, but principles of functional equivalence can not only cope with these translation problems, but also achieve a combination in the greatest degree on emotional, cultural and context level between the source language movie and the target language translation, so as to show thoroughly film’s cultural and artistic charm.

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