

Study on the Translation of English Movie Titles from the Perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory

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Abstract: With the advancement of the times, the film industry has developed rapidly, and numerous new films are released worldwide each year. Among them, many English-language films introduced to China have gained widespread popularity, enriching the cultural and entertainment lives of the audience. The introduction of these films has spurred related translation work, with the translation of movie titles being one of the most crucial aspects. The translation of movie titles is a highly creative task: a well-executed translation enhances the film's appeal, while a poorly translated title can lead to undesirable outcomes. As the "face" of the film, the title serves as a concise summary of the movie's content and plays a key role in attracting the audience's attention. With the aim of exploring how to translate movie titles effectively to open a window for cultural exchange, this paper, guided by Nida's functional equivalence theory, investigates the translation of English movie titles. This research not only provides theoretical guidance for translating foreign films into Chinese but also helps enhance our understanding of foreign cultures, thereby promoting cultural communication and mutual appreciation between China and other countries.

Keywords: Functional Equivalence Theory, Translation of English Movie Titles, Cultural Exchange.

1. Background Introduction

In an era of cultural prosperity and increasingly frequent cultural exchanges between China and other countries, films, as one of the most accessible and influential art forms today, play an increasingly important role in cultural communication. Today, a large number of English-language films are flooding into the Chinese market, with some achieving great success, while others have suffered box office failures. A comparison reveals that most of the successful films have highly iconic and captivating translated titles, which resonate deeply with audiences. On the other hand, many films that failed at the box office, apart from having lackluster content, also suffered from poor title translations that were either not concise enough or lacked distinctiveness.

"Unlike other art forms, films cannot be displayed like books or newspapers... What often attracts the audience first is the title" (He Ning, 1998: 37). The effectiveness of the title translation directly influences the size of the audience and the spread of the film, thereby affecting the success of cultural exchange. However, the translation of English movie titles still does not receive enough attention. Guided by the theory of functional equivalence, this paper aims to explore the translation of English movie titles in order to provide some reference for related studies.

2. Introduction to Functional Equivalence Theory

In 1964, Eugene Nida introduced two types of equivalence: formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence. Later, he revised the term "dynamic equivalence" to "functional equivalence" and provided further clarification. Nida defined translation as "the reproduction of source language information in the most suitable and natural equivalent language, from both a semantic and stylistic perspective" (Tan Zaixi, 1999: 25). According to Nida, the quality of a translation should not be assessed solely by comparing the

corresponding meanings, grammatical structures, and rhetorical devices, but rather by whether the translator's understanding aligns with the original author's. The translator must be able to reproduce the original message as intended by the author through the three steps he outlined.

In other words, "functional equivalence" fundamentally requires a comparison of whether the meaning expressed in both the original and the translated texts, along with the cultural connotations they convey, are consistent. Nida's theory of functional equivalence asserts that translation is not just about lexical equivalence, but also about equivalence in meaning, style, and text structure. A translation conveys not only surface-level lexical information but also deep cultural meanings. The equivalence in "dynamic equivalence" includes four aspects: lexical equivalence, syntactic equivalence, discourse equivalence, and stylistic equivalence. Among these, Nida considers meaning to be the most important, with form being secondary. The form often hides the cultural meaning of the original text and may hinder cultural exchange. Based on Nida's translation theory, the four aspects of dynamic equivalence should serve as the guiding principles for translation, ensuring that the cultural connotations of the original text are accurately reproduced in the translation.

3. Characteristics and Functions of Movie Titles

Movie titles are characterized by being concise, structurally simple, and direct. They function like a business card, providing a brief introduction to the movie's content and attracting audiences to watch it. Despite their brevity, movie titles play a crucial role in the success of a film. According to Ruan Hongmei and Li Na (2006: 139), "A movie title not only reflects the film's content, conveys the thematic message, and establishes the emotional tone for the entire film, but also attracts the audience, thereby increasing box office revenue." As scholar He Ying (2001: 57) summarized, "There are four

main functions of a movie title. The first is the informational function, which highlights the film's content and helps the audience better understand the film. The second is the expressive function, which sets the emotional tone of the film, evoking strong feelings such as lyrical sentiment, suspense, or comedy. The third is the aesthetic function, which moves the audience through the elegance, fluency, and vivid imagery of the language, creating an aesthetic pleasure. The fourth is the promotional function, which attracts the audience and boosts box office earnings." A good movie title should encompass all four of these functions, adding an important touch to the film's overall appeal.

4. The Achievement of Functional Equivalence

By combining the theory of functional equivalence with the functions of movie titles, on a macro level, the English translation of a movie title should achieve equivalence in the four key functions of the original title: informational, expressive, aesthetic, and promotional, in order to provide the target audience with the same cultural experience. The realization of these different aspects of functional equivalence requires the translator to "combine the cultural characteristics of the target language and flexibly employ the strategies of domestication and foreignization" (Xiao Ju, 2019: 106). Further, the translator should "deeply understand the content and style of the film, carefully consider word choice, and strive to accurately capture both the surface and associative meanings of the source and target languages. This involves not only ensuring equivalence but also considering the conveyability and acceptability of the translated title. The translator must correctly handle and flexibly balance literal translation and free translation, appropriately expressing both formal and colloquial language, and adjusting for elegance and simplicity" (Yao Qinghua, 1999: 76).

4.1. Informational Equivalence

Information is the most crucial element in a movie title, serving to indicate the film's main content and acting as a "guide" for the audience. The information conveyed must be accurate and precise, with appropriate word choices that neither omit nor distort meaning, nor should irrelevant content be added for sensationalism. When the information is effectively conveyed, it allows the audience to understand the main plot of the film and make an informed decision about whether they are interested in watching it. Likewise, the translated movie title should fulfill the same function, guiding the audience towards the correct understanding of the film's content.

Below, I will analyze several movie titles as examples:

Example 1: Pulp Fiction

Translation: 《低俗小说》

Analysis: This is a classic film that tells several bizarre and lowbrow stories. The common translation of the title is 《低俗小说》, which follows a literal translation approach. And, it also has another name called 《黑色追缉令》. The two elements of the original title are preserved in the name of 《低俗小说》, revealing the movie's main content—namely, a series of crude, trivial stories. However, the alternative translation, 《黑色追缉令》 deviates significantly from the original title. It can be considered a reinterpretation of the film's name, and

the informational elements of the original title are completely lost. From the perspective of the translation alone, viewers might mistakenly assume that this is a completely different film. Therefore, in terms of informational equivalence, 《低俗小说》 is more faithful to the original title and preserves its content accurately.

Similarly, films such as *The Searchers* (搜索者), *Giant* (巨人), *Rain Man* (雨人), *The Graduate* (毕业生), *Taxi Driver* (出租车司机), and *Roman Holidays* (罗马假日) have titles composed of simple nouns, and their Chinese translations also use corresponding straightforward nouns. These translations are clear, concise, and effectively convey the main information of the films, allowing the audience to immediately understand what the film is likely about.

Of course, this does not mean that conveying the original information requires a literal translation. In some cases, the translator can handle the translation flexibly while ensuring the information remains intact.

Example 2: Catch Me If You Can

Translation: 《猫鼠游戏》

Analysis: The original title was initially translated as 《我知道你是谁》, which was far from the essence of the original title and could mislead the audience regarding the film's plot. Later, the commonly accepted translation was 《猫鼠游戏》, which not only subtly incorporates the key element of the original title, "catching", but also makes the title more vivid and engaging. This translation provides a better reflection of the movie's themes and content, accurately conveying the informational essence of the film.

4.2. The Achievement of Expressive Equivalence

Movie titles are akin to the titles of articles, serving as a highly condensed summary of the film's content while establishing its emotional tone. From the choice of words—whether positive or negative, formal or informal—the audience can infer the underlying emotions. From this perspective, when translating a movie title, it is essential to accurately grasp the emotional tone and avoid subjective speculation. The atmosphere created by the original title should not be arbitrarily altered. The translator, guided by the principle of functional equivalence, should strive to reproduce the emotions embedded in the original title.

Given the vast cultural differences between Chinese and English-speaking audiences, achieving emotional resonance requires overcoming cultural barriers. The translator should employ a domestication strategy, aligning with the cultural psychology of the target audience. According to Venuti's definition, the domestication strategy is "an ethnocentric approach that makes the foreign text conform to the cultural values of the target language, bringing the original author into the culture of the target language." Specifically, for movie title translations, this means that when a foreign language title is translated into a native language, the foreign literary image is abandoned in favor of corresponding or similar images from the target culture. If the foreign culture includes expressions or literary images that are absent in the target culture, the translator must interpret them from the perspective of the target culture's stance and values (Liu Xinhong, Su Zhenli, Sun Xiangning, 2007: 88).

Literal translation is considered the best method in traditional Chinese translation theory. This method retains the

form and meaning of the source language to the greatest extent (Liu Miqing, 1986: 24). However, due to cultural differences, a movie title often carries a unique internal meaning that is difficult to convey through literal translation. In such cases, alternative methods such as free translation or adaptation are necessary. Adaptation involves the translator adjusting the content to meet the specific needs of a particular audience under specific conditions, using methods such as addition, omission, rearrangement, summarization, and alteration (Huang Zhonglian, 2002: 26-57). Let's look at the following examples.

Example 3: Seven

Translation: 《七宗罪》

Analysis: This is a classic film about religious faith, specifically focusing on the seven deadly sins described in the Bible. While Western audiences can easily associate the title with its specific meaning in Western religious culture, the majority of Chinese viewers are unfamiliar with Western religions or the Bible, and therefore cannot fully grasp the cultural connotations. The Chinese translation 《七宗罪》 specifies the number "seven" and uses an expanded translation method. By focusing on the concept of sin, the translation diminishes the religious tone and makes the content more accessible to Chinese audiences, reducing their understanding barriers.

Example 4: Batman; Spiderman

Translation: 《蝙蝠侠》; 《蜘蛛侠》

Analysis: In many blockbuster films from the West, superheroes are often depicted as ordinary people who transform into extraordinary beings, typically referred to as "supermen" in Western culture. In Chinese culture, however, such figures are often termed "侠客" (knights) or "好汉" (heroes). The concept of "侠客" has been deeply embedded in Chinese culture for centuries, and the term evokes an image of justice and heroism. This aligns closely with the image conveyed by the English term "superman." Therefore, translating Batman as 《蝙蝠侠》 and Spiderman as 《蜘蛛侠》 is an effective way to adapt the original cultural connotations, allowing Chinese audiences to relate more easily to the characters.

Example 5: Ocean's Twelve

Translation: 《十二罗汉》

Analysis: Chinese audiences, upon seeing the term "罗汉" (Arhat), might immediately think of the Buddhist "Eighteen Arhats" and thus mistakenly associate Twelve Arhats with sacred figures who protect Buddhist teachings. However, the film actually revolves around twelve thieves. While this mistranslation may attract attention, it distorts the cultural message and can lead to misinterpretation. A more accurate translation, such as 《盗海豪情 12 瞒徒》, preserves the number "12" and gives a clearer indication of the main plot and characters, ensuring that the information conveyed is more precise.

Next, let's look at examples where the use of domestication helps meet the expression needs of Chinese audiences, achieving functional equivalence. In such cases, the translator may "consciously choose local words or cultural keywords, or even abandon the original title's content and form, reassigning a new title to the film" (Wang Yubo & Zhu Lizhen,

2018: 112).

Example 6: The Wedding Night

Translation: 《洞房花烛夜》

Analysis: This is a good example of effective translation. While a direct translation of The Wedding Night would result in 《婚礼之夜》, which would be semantically accurate, it lacks the emotional depth conveyed by 《洞房花烛夜》. In Chinese tradition, the first night of marriage is referred to as 《洞房花烛夜》, a term that carries connotations of celebration and anticipation. The term 《婚礼之夜》 lacks the same sense of ceremony and joy, and thus does not adequately reflect the cultural richness of the original context.

Example 7: The Lolita

Translation: 《一树梨花压海棠》

Analysis: This film's title translation has received widespread praise for its elegant and culturally resonant adaptation. The story revolves around a middle-aged man falling in love with his 14-year-old stepdaughter, Lolita. The name "Lolita" refers to a young girl, but the term is unfamiliar to most Chinese audiences and does not evoke the same cultural connotations. The translation 《一树梨花压海棠》 uses a traditional Chinese metaphor, which subtly and beautifully conveys the same cultural imagery. This expression, originating from a poem by Song Dynasty poets Zhang Xian and Su Shi, refers to an older man marrying a much younger woman, creating a delicate, indirect reference to the core themes of the movie. The metaphorical nature of 《一树梨花压海棠》 merges Chinese tradition with the film's storyline, providing an elegant and culturally appropriate adaptation that resonates more deeply with Chinese audiences (Zheng Yuqi & Wang Xiaodong, 2006: 68).

In the translation of movie titles, there are also instances involving slang, which often carries strong emotional connotations and rich cultural undertones (Rongmei Yu, 2018). Translators must carefully verify the meaning and cultural context, avoiding subjective interpretations.

Example 8: One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

Translation: 《飞越疯人院》

Analysis: The commonly used translation for this film is 《飞越疯人院》, but it was previously translated as 《飞越杜鹃窝》. The latter translation, though seemingly a direct rendering of the original English title, would likely confuse Chinese audiences, making them think the movie is about a cuckoo's nest. This misunderstanding arises from not fully researching the cultural connotations of the source and target languages. In English slang, "cuckoo" refers to a "mad person," and "the Cuckoo's Nest" symbolizes a mental institution. The entire film's plot revolves around this mental hospital, where the patients exhibit bizarre and incomprehensible behavior, akin to that of a cuckoo bird. However, in Chinese culture, "杜鹃" (cuckoo) is associated with a melancholic, sorrowful image, which does not align with the concept of madness. Translating it as 《飞越杜鹃窝》 would confuse Chinese audiences, as it misrepresents the film's essence.

Example 9: Hamlet; Oliver Twist

Translation: 《王子复仇记》; 《雾都孤儿》

Analysis: In literary works, the expressive function of equivalence is quite evident. Both of these films are named after their protagonists, a common naming convention in English films, but Chinese audiences may not be familiar with these characters. Hamlet and Oliver Twist are famous figures in English literature, but for ordinary viewers without higher education or background knowledge, these titles may not evoke a strong resonance. The existing translations, using adaptation, translate Hamlet as 《王子复仇记》 and Oliver Twist as 《雾都孤儿》, making the titles more accessible and understandable. These titles not only introduce the main content of the film but also create a sense of tragedy and loneliness. Upon seeing these titles, viewers will naturally wonder: What misfortune has the prince suffered, and how will he seek revenge? What is the foggy city, and how does the orphan live? To answer these questions, the audience is compelled to watch the films, thus fulfilling the goal of promoting the movie.

Example 10: Gone with the Wind

Translation: 《乱世佳人》

Analysis: This is a classic and highly successful film, adapted from the novel *Gone with the Wind*. While the film title has been translated as 《飘》 or 《随风而逝》, the translation 《乱世佳人》 is more widely accepted by Chinese audiences. 《乱世佳人》 clearly conveys the film's historical context—the American Civil War—while highlighting the central character's identity as a "beauty." This translation is easier to understand and helps the audience grasp the main themes of the film. Though readers of *Gone with the Wind* might be familiar with the original, the term 《飘》 could leave other viewers feeling uncertain about the story's direction. However, with 《乱世佳人》, even those without literary background can easily understand the basic premise of the film, helping them decide whether to watch it.

4.3. The Achievement of Aesthetic Equivalence

Aesthetic equivalence is another major function of movie titles, referring to the visual and auditory enjoyment the words themselves bring to the audience. A title that is concise, catchy, smooth, and vivid can stimulate the audience's senses, offering them a delightful experience and evoking an emotional resonance. This is an intangible yet traceable element. For example, the four-character structure in Chinese is highly advantageous in movie title translation: phonetically pleasing, with a rhythmic cadence, and semantically compact and elegant (Lin Qiuyun, 1996: 15). However, due to the different structural forms of Chinese and English, the ways in which beauty is expressed differ. This requires the translator to possess good aesthetic sensibility and excellent translation skills to achieve aesthetic equivalence.

Chinese culture values symmetry and harmonious unity, which is why the four-character structure is frequently used in Chinese titles. In contrast, Western cultures emphasize linguistic simplicity and consider conciseness to be the essence of wisdom (Bao Huinan & Bao Ang, 2004: 37). In translation, the translator should strive to minimize differences and create a similar aesthetic experience for the target-language audience.

Example 11: Unforgiven

Translation: 《不可饶恕》

Analysis: The original English title is just one word, yet it

carries deep connotations. Unforgiven comes from the verb "forgive," with a passive meaning of "not forgiven." In English, the passive voice is often used to emphasize the object, while Chinese tends to use the active voice to highlight subjective consciousness. This translation effectively transforms the passive voice into the active, using a four-character Chinese structure that is forceful and powerful, aligning well with Chinese readers' habits and aesthetic preferences.

Example 12: Dance with Wolves

Translation: 《与狼共舞》

Analysis: In this case, the translator used a literal translation method to preserve the style of the original title, choosing words that are concise yet vivid, conveying a sense of movement and imagery. The translation effectively maintains the dynamic and visual essence of the original, creating a similar aesthetic effect for Chinese audiences.

Example 13: Legally Blonde

Translation: 《律政俏佳人》

Analysis: This movie title is particularly interesting. The word "blonde" creates a strong visual impact, instantly conjuring an image of a "blonde-haired, blue-eyed beauty." The contrast between this sensual image and the serious, no-nonsense image of a "lawyer" creates curiosity and intrigue. The juxtaposition of these seemingly contradictory terms arouses the audience's curiosity. A literal translation would likely result in 《金发律师》, which could convey the sensual connotations of "blonde" in foreign cultures, but would be less effective in China, where blonde hair is not commonly associated with the same aesthetic. This reflects a cultural difference in aesthetic preferences. To bridge this gap, the translator used the domestication strategy, replacing "blonde" with "俏佳人" (cute and beautiful lady), which evokes a playful and elegant image, making the lawyer character more relatable and appealing to Chinese audiences. This translation is more in line with Chinese cultural values and aesthetic tastes.

4.4. The Achievement of Promotional Equivalence

Movies not only have cultural value but also commercial value. To realize their commercial potential, extensive promotion is essential, and the movie title acts as the film's business card. A striking business card naturally attracts more attention. This is the promotional function of the film title: it must faithfully reflect the film's content while also serving as a tool for quick promotion and attracting the audience (Liang Jian & Li Lu, 2009: 210). Despite being brief, the film title is the highlight of the movie (Zheng Yuqi & Wang Xiaodong, 2006: 67). For a film to achieve commercial success in China, the title translation must also consider this function, aiming to preserve the same promotional impact as the original title.

Example 14: Leon; The Piano

Translation: 《这个杀手不太冷》; 《钢琴别恋》

Analysis: These two movie titles are perfect examples of how to adapt a straightforward English title into something more eye-catching for Chinese audiences. In English, these titles are simple and descriptive, using a single noun to convey the main content of the film. However, in Chinese, such titles would be too plain and lack appeal. A literal

translation like 《利昂》 (Leon) and 《钢琴》 (Piano) would be too ordinary and fail to catch the audience's attention. The official Chinese title for Leon- 《这个杀手不太冷》 -is much more engaging. Chinese audiences typically enjoy films with strong emotional and narrative appeal, and the contrast between the character of the cold killer and the warmth suggested by the title draws the viewer in. For The Piano, the translation 《钢琴别恋》 cleverly links the piano with love, evoking a romantic and aesthetic feeling, which is sure to spark curiosity about the movie's emotional story.

Example 15: Ghost; The Bachelor

Translation: 《人鬼情未了》; 《亿万未婚夫》

Analysis: These English titles are also simple, consisting of just one noun each. In addition to the common translations 《幽灵》 (Ghost) and 《单身汉》 (Bachelor), the titles could have been translated more directly. However, when comparing these, we find that one-word translations appear flat and lack both artistic impact and a sense of intrigue. Additionally, the term “单身汉”(Bachelor) in Chinese often carries a negative connotation, referring to someone who cannot find a wife, which is not the image portrayed in the film. The protagonist in The Bachelor is a successful young man, far from the poor, lonely bachelor implied by the term. In contrast, 《人鬼情未了》 and 《亿万未婚夫》 add descriptive elements to the original titles, making the language more natural and fluid while also providing a visual impact that arouses the audience's curiosity and interest in the film.

Example 16: Mission Impossible

Translation: 《碟中谍》

Analysis: This film was a huge success in China, grossing billions at the box office. However, if the movie title had been translated literally as 《不可能的任务》, it is doubtful that it would have had the same level of success. 《不可能的任务》 lacks a distinctive and attention-grabbing element, making it less likely to captivate the audience. On the other hand, 《碟中谍》 is a much more thought-provoking title. The word“碟” evokes an image of a CD or a disk, while “谍” is associated with the mysterious world of espionage. This juxtaposition sparks the audience's curiosity and sense of intrigue. The profession of a spy is inherently fascinating and mysterious, making the title more appealing and enticing for viewers who want to learn more.

5. Conclusion

Movie titles serve as a key to unlocking the audience's attention, and translating movie titles is the process of refining and polishing this key. A good translation can significantly enhance the film, attracting the audience's favor. Due to the unique characteristics and functions of movie titles, their translation differs from that of other types of texts and cannot be approached with a one-size-fits-all method. The translation must be based on the original text and appropriately adjusted according to the target audience's comprehension ability and expectations.

This paper, guided by the theory of functional equivalence, explores how to achieve equivalence in the four key functions of the original English movie titles. After analysis, it is evident that achieving functional equivalence is no easy task due to the substantial differences between Chinese and English in terms of linguistic expression and cultural background. When translating movie titles, the translator must thoroughly analyze the source language's linguistic features and cultural connotations, and flexibly apply domestication and foreignization strategies. Techniques such as literal translation, free translation, addition, and adaptation should be employed to create an excellent translated title. In doing so, the translated title can better serve as a window for cultural exchange, promoting mutual understanding and facilitating cultural communication between China and the world.

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