Research on Subtitle Translation of White Snake from the Perspective of Multimodal Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

In recent years, due to the rapid and prosperous development of cultural industry, the "going out" of Chinese culture has become an inevitable trend of national development. The adaptation of traditional classic story animation films not only innovatively interprets Chinese national culture, but also shows the unique role of animated films in spreading national culture. Based on one of the four ancient Chinese folk legends, The Legend of the White Snake, the Chinese animated film White Snake tells the story of a heartfelt love between the white snake Bai Suzhen and the human Xu Xian in their previous lives. The film, released in mainland China on January 11, 2019, eventually earned RMB 450 million at the box office, making it one of the masterpieces of domestic animated films. Applying the theoretical framework of Professor Zhang Delu's multimodal discourse analysis, this paper analyzes the subtitle translation of White Snake from four aspects: cultural level, contextual level, content level and expression level. It also explores how the subtitle translation intermingles and fits with the multimodality of sound, image and picture, which provides experience for the subtitle translation of domestic animation films.

Keywords

Multimodal Discourse Analysis; Subtitle Translation; White Snake; Translation Strategies.

1. Introduction

Since the 21st century, science and technology have promoted the rapid development of multimedia, enriching the form of communication media. Film and television works have gradually become an important part of people's daily entertainment life. In recent years, the "going out" of Chinese culture has become an inevitable trend of national development. The film and television industry is one of the major aspects and a platform for China to showcase itself to the world. Subtitles play a key role in the "going out" process, which serve as a bridge to help foreign audience to better understand the story and Chinese culture. The quality of subtitle translation is also pivotal in the overseas acceptance and recognition of movies. It directly affects the audience's viewing experience, which is also related to the smooth intercultural communication. Translation of film subtitles does not only involve the conversion between two languages, but also the interaction between different modes and modalities. In other words, the factors affecting subtitle translation are not only limited to language, but also involve images, sound, and sub-language. Therefore, based on the comprehensive theoretical framework of multimodal discourse analysis, this thesis explores the English translation of subtitles of the Chinese animated film *White Snake* from four aspects: cultural level, contextual level, content level and expression level, in order to provide some guidance for the translation of subtitles of domestic animation films.

2. Theoretical Framework

Multimodal discourse refers to the coexistence of language with other symbolic resources to co-construct meaning. It is the phenomenon of using multiple senses such as visual, auditory, and tactile to communicate through multiple means and symbolic resources such as language, images, sounds, and actions [1]. In the 1990s, multimodal discourse analysis, which has emerged in the west, can help to overcome these limitations to a large extent. "Discourse analysis" was first proposed by Zellig Harris, an American structuralist linguist. The multimodal discourse analysis in discourse analysis theory is mainly based on the systemic functional linguistics founded by British linguist Halliday. In the 1980s, Halliday proposed three major metafunctions of language: conceptual function, interpersonal function and discourse function. In the 1990s, Kress & Van Leeuwen established a basic framework of visual grammar based on the three metafunctional theories of Halliday's systemic functional linguistics and related research theories of film, and created three kinds of meanings of images, namely, reproductive meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning [2].

In 2003, Li Zhanzi introduced multimodal discourse theory to China for the first time. He introduced the visual grammar theory and the research method of images constructed by Kress & Leeuwen in his book *The Social Semiotics Analysis of Multimodal Discourse*, which promoted the research on multimodal discourse analysis in China. Then, Hu Zhuanglin, Zhu Yongsheng, Zhang Delu and other scholars have conducted in-depth studies on multimodal discourse. In 2009, the first monograph on multimodal discourse analysis, *Multimodalization and Multimodal Discourse Research in the Visual Environment*, written by Wei Qinhong, was published in China. Subsequently, several monographs on theoretical studies of multimodal discourse analysis have started to emerge, including theoretically oriented ones, such as Gao Youmei's (2014) study of multimodal discourse from the perspective of cognitive linguistics and Zhang Delu's (2015) study of multimodal discourse from the perspective of systemic functional linguistics. It also includes the results of monographs that focus on applied research, such as Zhang Lixin's (2012) study of humorous discourse and Dai Shulan's (2015) research analysis of television interviews.

The theoretical framework chosen for this thesis is the multimodal discourse analysis theoretical framework, put forward by Professor Zhang Delu on the basis of Halliday's systemic functional linguistics. He summarizes the research results of Halliday and other predecessors, and conducts an in-depth analysis and generalization of multimodal discourse analysis, proposing a comprehensive theoretical framework for multimodal discourse analysis and the complementary and non-complementary links between modalities. He argues that the framework consists of four levels, namely, cultural level, contextual level, content level, and expression level.

(1) Cultural level

In accordance with Zhang Delu, the cultural level consists of the people's thinking mode, living philosophy, habits and customs, the ideology formed by all the hidden rules of the society, as well as the communicative procedure or structural potential that can realize this ideology, which is called genre.

(2) Contextual level

In multimodal discourse, the situational context determines the choice of discourse meaning and the role of each mode in constituting the whole meaning of the discourse. The meaning of the discourse contains ideational meaning, interpersonal meaning and textual meaning. The three meaning components are determined by the three variables in situational context. The choice of the ideational meaning is decided by the discourse field, the choice of the interpersonal meaning by the discourse tenor, the choice of the textual meaning by the discourse mode.

(3) Content level

The content level includes meaning and form. At the level of discourse meaning, there are conceptual meaning, interpersonal meaning, and schematic meaning governed by the scope of discourse, the tone of discourse, and the manner of discourse. The formal level refers to the different formal systems for realizing meaning, including the lexico-grammatical system of language, the visual ideographic form and visual grammatical system, the auditory ideographic form and auditory grammatical system, the tactile ideographic form and tactile grammatical system, and the relationship between the grammars of each modality.

(4) Expression level

Expression level refers to the media, which is the material form in which discourse is ultimately expressed in the material world and includes two major categories: linguistic and non-linguistic. The linguistic level includes two categories: purely verbal and accompanied by language; the non-verbal level includes two categories: physical and non-physical. The physical ones include facial expressions, gestures, body gestures and movements. The non-physical ones include instrumental ones, such as PPT, laboratory, network platform, physical objects (projection), sound, and simultaneous interpretation room.

Among the four level, cultural level is the most important level, which is the beginning of the other three levels; cultural level is expressed through the situational context; the situational context determines the meaning of discourse in the content level, which in turn is reflected through the form of discourse and the intrinsic relationship between discourses; and finally, the meaning of discourse is reflected through linguistic and non-linguistic forms of media [3]. The relationship between the levels of the framework is shown in the following diagrams.
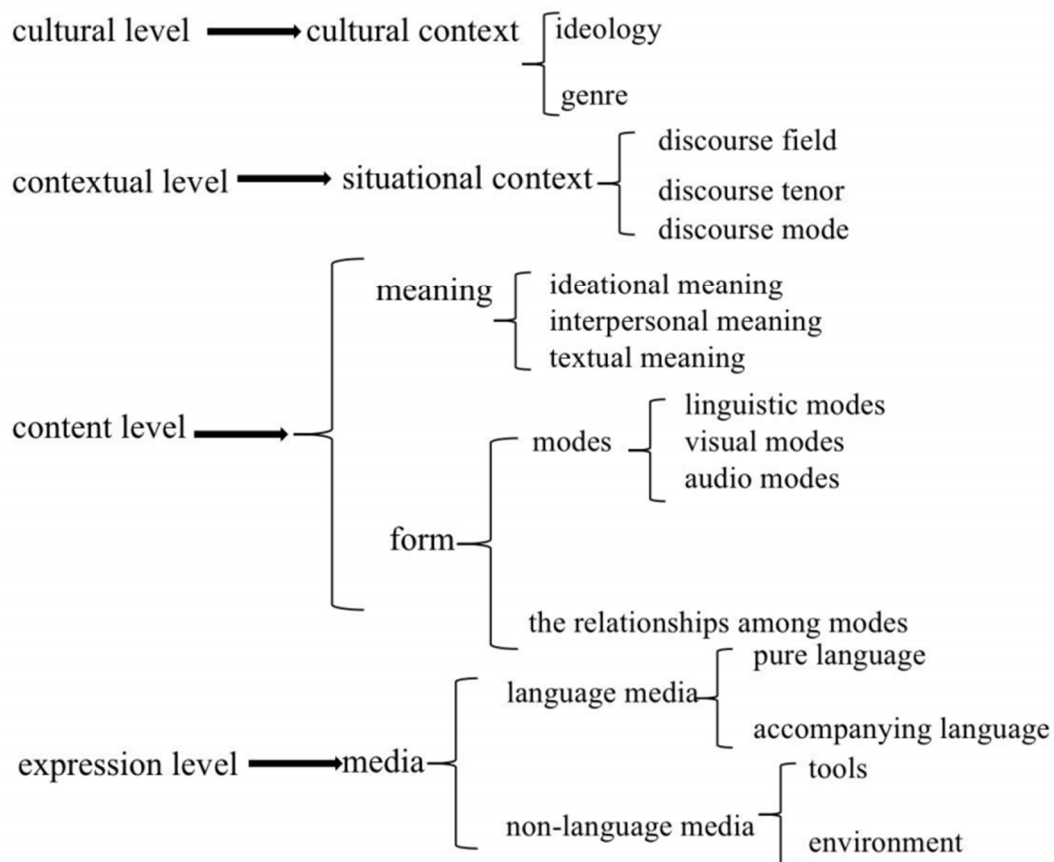

Figure 1. Synthetic Theoretical Framework Constructed by Zhang Delu

3. Analysis of Subtitle Translation of White Snake from the Perspective of Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Released on January 11, 2019, Chinese animated film *White Snake* tells the story of the forbidden love between Blanca, a white snake demon, and Xuan, a snake catcher. It is adapted from "Legend of the White Snake", one of the the folk tales widely circulated in ancient China. The tale goes that a white snake named Bai Suzhen came to the human world and married Xu Xian. Unfortunately, their marriage was opposed by a Buddhist monk named Fahai, who believed that the marriage between human and evil spirit could not be allowed. He then kept Bai Suzhen under the Leifeng Pagoda. Many years later, after gaining a Zhuangyuan title (the first place in the imperial examination), Bai Suzhen's son knelt down in front of the Leifeng Pagoda. God was moved by his action and collapsed the pagoda from which Bai Suzhen is freed. Finally, she reunited with her husband and son. Having taken RMB 450 million, this film now ranks eighth at the box office of domestic animated films, becoming one of the masterpieces of Chinese animated films with exquisite animation design and subversive plot. It was released in North America on November 15 of that year.

Film is a combination of dialogue, images, music, text, etc., so it is a typical multimodal discourse. In the process of film projection, the four dimensions function almost simultaneously and one cannot be missing [4]. In this paper, the subtitle translation of the film will be analyzed from the four levels of multimodal discourse analysis, to explore how the subtitle translation intersects and fits with the multimodality of sound, image, and picture.

3.1. Cultural Level

Cultural level includes ideology, communicative traditions, communicative forms, and communication technologies. It is the key level that makes multimodal communication possible. Subtitling translation achieves effective communication of information to viewers in different cultural contexts, prompting them to better understand and appreciate film and television works. The target language does not correspond to the source language completely, so on the basis of faithfulness to the original text, the translator should maintain the original style of the source language, so that the audience can better understand the connotation and spirit of the movie, and more effectively achieve the functional equivalence between the target language and the source language..

Example 1: "小白"、"小青"

Translation: "Blanca", "Verta"

"小白" and "小青" are the names of two snake demons in the film. Here, the translator does not translate them phonetically as "Xiao Bai" and "Xiao Qing", nor does he translate them directly as "white" and "green". Instead, the translator uses the translation strategy of naturalization. In Latin, "blanc" and "vert" mean "white" and "green" respectively. The feminine suffix "a" is added to these two words to form female names. The translation not only reflects the words "白" and "青", but also the fact that the snake demons is female. Moreover, the names "Blanca" and "Verta" are not unfamiliar to overseas audiences. "Blanca" also means "white and beautiful woman" in English, which corresponds to the image of the white girl in *White Snake* with flowing hair and soft and beautiful skin.

Example 2: 我心里有处空洞，是我缺了什么。为何每次将要突破，就三华全乱，周天动摇？

Translation: There's an emptiness inside my heart. It's missing something. Why is it when I get close, I always get thrown into all this chaos?

At the beginning of the movie, Blanca said the above lines after the fire demon, expressing the current situation that she can not break through every time she cultivates to the off. In Chinese ancient times, the word "华" is identical with the word "花". The so-called "三华", also known as the "三花", which is a Taoist term. It refers to "精"、"气" and "神" in Chinese, indicating the body's essence and spirit of glory. "三华全乱，周天动摇" describes the state of chaos when Blanca goes off the rails. The word "chaos" in English means "a state of extreme confusion and disorder". "Get thrown into all this chaos" is used to simply express the state of confusion, which is easy for the target audience to understand.

Example 3: 二十八星宿。朱雀在顶，玄武入宫，宫为内卦，门为外卦。
Translation: Constellations. Bird on a ceiling, tortoise under, palace within, gate without.
Example 4: 女土蝠、毕月乌，二十八星宿，鬼金羊、心月狐，东南向的角较翼，生门就在那边。
Translation: wait, the woman and the net. Constellations. There's the heart, the ghost, southwest horn, chariot, wing. So the door of life is over there.

In example 3, the concept of "二十八星宿" does not exist in Western culture, so the translators have translated it into the familiar word constellations in order to let the audience better understand the concept. Similarly, there is no concept corresponding to "朱雀" and "玄武". The translator translates the two words as "bird" and "tortoise", which may make it difficult to associate them with the four sacred animals of ancient China. In this case, he used the two animals known to the audience to refer to "朱雀" and "玄武", according to the image characteristics of them. Meanwhile, the translation is similar in length to the original text, ensuring the synchronization of the picture and the lines.

In example 4, when Xuan and Blanca fell in the exorcism chamber, Xuan looked at the reflection of the astrological image on the ice on the ground and said this line. What he recited is precisely the name of the twenty-eight constellations. "女土蝠" is the third star of the northern Xuanwu, whose star cluster is like a skip, easy to resemble the word "女". "毕月乌" is the fifth star of the White Tiger in the west. "鬼金羊" is the second star in the south. The fact that Xuan could see the reflections of these two hosts under the operation of the formation means that he was in or facing the northwest of the formation. When he looked back up to the sky, he saw the opposite direction of the Vermilion Bird's second night of the Ghost Golden Sheep in the south and the Green Dragon's fifth night of the Heart Moon Fox in the east, then between these two stars is the southeast direction of the Horned Wood Sculptor, Square Water Earth and Winged Fire Snake. At this point, Xuan has distinguished the eight directions in the formation, and in the case that the formation is not chaired by anyone without changes (at this time the General has died), Xuan deduces the direction of the birth gate from it according to the Qi Men Dun Jia that he has learned. There is no "二十八星宿" in English culture, so the translator adopts the translation strategy of dissimilation to translate them directly, preserving these cultural elements with Chinese characteristics, which is conducive to the "going out" of Chinese culture.

3.2. Contextual Level

In the theory of multimodal discourse analysis, context refers to the various factors in linguistic communication in which the speaker uses and understands contextual relations or nonverbal speech, such as the temporal space in which he or she is located, the pretext of the dialogue, and the identity context of the speaker [5]. Context arises in the linguistic communication between the speaker and the listener, and the meaning of the discourse is translated in a specific context.

In subtitle translation, the translator takes into account the socio-cultural background of the audience and sometimes conveys the context by adding or subtracting subtitles therefore the audience needs to make up for the missing contextual information through images, music, dialogues, etc.

Example 5: 姑娘。姑娘。姑娘。你的珠钗掉了。

Translation: Excuse me? Miss. Miss. You dropped your hairpin.

At the end of the film, Blanca and Verta deliberately left the hairpin for Xu Xian (the reincarnated Xuan) to pick up. Xu Xian chased after them on the Broken Bridge to return the hairpin, which is why he shouted "姑娘" three times. Instead of translating all three "姑娘" as "Miss", the translator translates the first "姑娘" as "Excuse me" according to the speaking habits of the characters. "Excuse me" makes Xu Xian more polite, which also fits the image of him as a scholar. It is worth noting that "姑娘" appears several times in the film, and the translator deals with it differently. When the young people call each other "姑娘", it is translated as "Miss"; when the old people call each other "姑娘", it is translated as "young lady" [6]. This not only avoids repetition, but also conforms to the language habits of people in different age groups.

Example 6: 谢谢官人。

Transation: Thank you, sir.

This is what Blanca said when she thanked Xu Xian for picking up the hairpin. "官人" generally refers to a honorific for a man in Song dynasty, which is also the name that a wife calls her husband. Here is the first usage. The translator took into account the situation and the psychology of the speaker, as well as the cultural background of the foreign audience, so "官人" is translated into the more acceptable word "sir".

3.3. Content Level

The content level includes the discourse meaning level and the formal level. At the discourse meaning level, there are conceptual meaning, interpersonal meaning, and schematic meaning that are governed by the scope of discourse, the tone of discourse, and the manner of discourse. The formal level refers to the different formal systems for realizing meaning. The interpreter has to deliver the dialogue to the target audience accurately, while usually omitting the interpersonal and stylistic meanings. Because of the limitations of screen size and dialogue time, the translation should be as clear and concise as possible so that the audience can quickly understand what the picture is trying to say.

Example 7: 阿花姐，能把那个雄黄酒递下来吗？

这个酒好，雄黄料用的足。

Translation: Hua, can you lower that wine down?

Sure, it's the good stuff too! Keeps the snakes away!

This is the line where Blanca meets the villagers in Snake Catcher Village to store the realgar wine. "雄黄酒" is a unique Chinese wine, generally drunk at the traditional Chinese festival of Dragon Boat Festival. It also has a special function of repelling snakes, a scene that echoes the villagers who hunt snakes for a living. If it is translated directly into "realgar wine", a note must be added to help the audience understand. Here, the translator chooses to omit the word

"realgar wine" and later adds that the wine is used to repel snakes. He adopts such a translation method, cleverly avoiding the trap that it is difficult to translate without notes, and achieving the functional equivalence requirement of "content first, form second", so that the translation is smooth and easy to understand.

Example 8: 他早不知喝过多少回孟婆汤，就算找到他，只怕也不是你记得的那个人了。

Translation：He's already lived through so many lifetimes. Even if you do find him, he may not be how you remember.

According to the Chinese legend, "孟婆汤" is a sacred soup made by Meng old woman in the netherworld. Ghosts who pass by the Nai He Bridge and reincarnate will forget all the troubles and memories of their past lives, love and hate, so that they can be reincarnated with peace of mind. In English culture, there is no such concept as "孟婆" and "孟婆汤". If they were explained one by one, the translated subtitles would become very long, which is not in line with the concise nature of the movie subtitles. This word only appears once in the film and is not a core element of the film, so the translator translates this sentence as "He's already lived through so many lifetimes", which directly conveys the meaning of the character's lines.

3.4. Expression Level

Expression level consists of two aspects, namely verbal media and non-verbal media. Linguistic media are divided into pure language and companion language. Subtitle translation is a written symbol, which is pure language. The voices, accents and accents of the characters in the film are sound symbols, which are companion language. The non-verbal media include the body movements and facial expressions of the characters when they speak, as well as the sound, the top and bottom layout of the subtitles, and the size of the subtitle font. The images of film and television works are fleeting, and the translated subtitles appear on the screen at the same time as the corresponding images, so that the audience can read and obtain plot information quickly [7]. In general, the bilingual subtitles below the film, with Chinese (source language) subtitles at the top and English (destination language) subtitles at the bottom, are not longer than one line.

Example 9: 阿宣，你听，外面有人在破阵。

阿宣。阿宣。阿宣。阿宣。阿宣。

你答应过我，要一起从这里出去。

我们还要一起去很多很多的地方。

别走。阿宣，别走。你别走。

君不见，

东流水，

来时无踪迹，

一去无穷已。

Translation: Xuan, listen. Someone's trying to break through.

Xuan? Xuan, no. Xuan! You can't! Please, Xuan.

Didn't you say that we'd leave together?

That we'd set out to the ends of the Earth and see so many places?

> Don't go! Please don't, Xuan. Don't go.
>
> Can't you see?
>
> Water's east.
>
> Flow without a trace?
>
> Go at their own pace.

In the formation, Blanca hears someone outside breaking through and hurriedly calles Xuan. Unexpectedly, his whole body has been frozen. Blanca is shocked and calles out to him over and over again. But unfortunately, he has already died. At this time the camera switches back and forth between Blanca and Xuan, each time accompanied by a subtle change in Blanca's expression and voice. She notices Xuan's strange condition and could not help but caress his cheek. And Blanca calles out to Xuan five times, from disbelief at the beginning to a sad plea later. Finally, she embraces Xuan and prays for him to wake up. The translator uses short sentences to fit the original text. The use of punctuation marks such as question marks and exclamation points, as well as the phrase "You can't!". The cold wind blows Xuan's body away, and Blanca drags it, crying "Don't go". Then Xuan's body fades away, and Blanca is in tears, just praying that the wind will not take him away. The translator uses "Don't go!" and "Please don't" to show the desperation and helplessness of Blanca as she watches Xuan leave.

At this time, the familiar melody rang out again: "Can't you see?/ Water's east./ Flow without a trace?/ Go at their own pace.", along with the memories of with Xuan and Blanca. In terms of hearing, the fusion of various musical elements and the combination of Chinese and Western musical instruments create a true and credible atmosphere for the film and television adaptation of animation, strengthening the narrative rhythm of the film. Blanca looked at the little bits and pieces with Xuan, can't help but to sing: "As it gleams./ This life flows by." The song also becomes the breaking point in the narrative to witness the characters' feelings. This section of the sound and picture let the audience immerse themselves in the situation, mood up and down with the psychological changes of the characters, can't help but let people heartily admire the beautiful and sincere feelings between human and demon Between the beautiful and sincere feelings.

> Example 10: 这珠钗年代久远，可是宝贵之物？
>
> 是啊。多谢小官人捡到。这可是万万不能丢失的。
>
> 小娘子看着好生面善，是何方之人？
>
> 说来话长。

Translation: It looks very old. Is it valuable?

> It is. Thank you again for picking it up. I'd really hate to lose it.
>
> You seem like a lady of good standing. Where are you from?
>
> That's a long story.

Blanca decides to search for the reincarnated Xuan, whether he remembers herself or not. On the broken bridge, the two passed by. Xu Xian picks up the fallen pearl hairpin, at which point the camera goes up and his face appears on the screen. After the hairpin is returned to Blanca, there is a dialogue on Example 9. In the translation of "这可是万万不能丢失的", the translator changes the subject, replacing "the hairpin" with "I". "I'd really hate to lose it" conveys the preciousness of the pearl hairpin, which cannot be lost. It is important to note that the background music of this dialogue is *Past Life*, which is the classic melody of "Bai Suzhen under Qingcheng Mountain" from the television show *The Legend of White Snake*. The lyrics of

"Thousands of mountains are separated by ten thousand miles / In the next life, we will renew the fate of this life" also corresponds to the theme of the film "the origin of the past life", with a long scroll of ink paintings to unfold the familiar plot one by one, making the audience reminisce. The scenes and character shapes of the film also correspond to those presented in the TV, visually and aurally awakening the audience's memories of this film and television classic and completing the inter-temporal and inter-dimensional interaction.

Visually effectively convey the space where traditional classic stories take place, highlighting the poetic traditional aesthetic conception. As an artistic language, color can subconsciously convey emotions to the audience. The rich color matching and combination shows the distinctive personality characteristics of the main characters and their psychological activities in different states. For instance, Xuan and Blanca travel on the river by boat, with green river and blue sky. The river is covered with a light layer of fog, and the blue mountains on both sides of the river rise and fall, half hidden in the fog. As the boat sails into the cave, Xuan turns the lantern, the light red light flowing around the cave and reflecting on the two of them. When they sails out of the cave, heaven and earth opened up and the warm beams of light illuminated the picture. Everything looks peaceful and beautiful, which implies that a romance was budding between Xuan and Blanca.

4. Conclusion

As a typical dynamic multimodal discourse, animated films contain a variety of social symbolic resources such as language, images and music. Therefore, this paper chooses *White Snake* as the object of study and uses Professor Zhang Delu's theoretical framework of multimodal discourse analysis to analyze its English translation subtitles from four levels: culture, context, content and expression. When translating the subtitles, the translator takes into account the multimodal elements of the environment in which the film characters live, ensuring that the translation is easy to and help foreign viewers fully understand the spirit of the film while accurately conveying the original message. The translation is easy to read and accurately conveys the message of the original text while helping foreign audiences fully understand the spiritual connotation of the film. This is in line with the communication characteristics of film as a special cultural medium, and is an important help for foreign audiences to establish their value identification with the film.

Therefore, in order to better achieve the purpose of cultural communication in domestic films, subtitle translators should constantly expand their encyclopedic knowledge, deepen their understanding of different cultures in China and abroad, and choose words or phrases with similar intercultural imagery or connotations when translating. At the same time, translators need to effectively integrate the four modal elements in the translation process, fully put themselves into the movie situation, so as to choose a translation in the target language with the same emotional color and tone as the original source language, and choose an appropriate translation expression style or format according to the speaking style of the character and the background of the movie, so as to achieve the benign interaction between subtitles and movie sound and image, and realize the purpose and functional equivalence of subtitle translation. This will help foreign audiences to build up their sense of identity in terms of values, and gain emotional resonance with foreign audiences, so as to help domestic movies go out of China and into the world better.

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