

A Multi-Modal Discourse Analysis of the C-E Translation of *Creation of the Gods I*

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Abstract—*Creation of the Gods I: Kingdom of Storms* is a fantasy film adapted from *The Investiture of the Gods*, recounting ancient Chinese historical and mythological stories. As an intuitive and effective means of cross-cultural communication, subtitle translation in films assumes paramount importance. With the development of multimedia technology, this paper analyzes the subtitle translation of the film from the four dimensions of culture, context, content, and expression proposed by Zhang Delu in his multi-modal discourse analysis framework. The study reveals that the English subtitle translation predominantly employs free translation strategies, interacting with the film's visual and auditory modalities to help audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds better understand and appreciate the film, thus fulfilling the cultural transmission function of film and television works.

Keywords—film subtitles, Multi-Modal Discourse Analysis, free translation

I. INTRODUCTION

Creation of the Gods I: Kingdom of Storms is a film adapted from *The Investiture of the Gods*, a fantasy work set against the historical backdrop of the Shang-Zhou dynastic transition. The film integrates abundant fantastic mythological elements, constructing a vast mythological world where gods, immortals, humans, and demons coexist, and recounting the story of immortals from the Chan Sect and Jie Sect engaging in intellectual and martial struggles to break formations, slay generals, and confer divine titles. The work portrays vivid characters such as Jiang Ziya, Nezha, Yang Jian, and Daji, alongside magical duels and war scenes. In the context of “telling Chinese stories well”, this film has also been translated into English and released domestically and internationally. As a crucial information carrier for foreign exchanges, enhancing the application and related research of multi-modal translation holds significant practical significance—it helps enrich China's external discourse expressions and better convey Chinese stories.

II. MULTI-MODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Multi-modal discourse refers to communicative phenomena that employ multiple sensory modalities (e.g., auditory, visual, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, and kinesthetic) and symbolic resources (e.g., language, images, sounds, movements, animations, and networks) [1]. Multi-modal discourse analysis, as proposed by Stockl, is a perspective that treats all communicative modalities as meaning-generating resources [2]. This perspective asserts that meaning is constructed through the interaction of multiple modalities, with all modalities becoming symbolic resources through social use and all discourses being inherently multi-

modal[3].

A. International Scholarly Focus

Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen first coined the concept of “multi-modal discourse,” defining it as the integration of meanings from diverse semiotic systems through two or more sensory modalities [4]. Kay O'Halloran constructed a conceptual framework for multi-modal discourse analysis, analyzing it from the perspective of systemic functional linguistics [5]. She provided analytical methods and case studies for material objects in three-dimensional space, integrating different media such as electronic, cinematic, and print formats.

B. Domestic Theoretical Exploration

Zhu Yongsheng emphasized the significance of systemic functional linguistics in multimodal analysis, arguing that non-linguistic symbols also serve as meaning sources [6]. Cui Hao explored the conversion and interaction between linguistic and non-linguistic symbols in subtitle translation, highlighting that it involves not only linguistic transfer but also the transformation of visual, auditory, and kinetic modalities [7]. Feng Dezheng et al. reviewed key developments in multimodal discourse analysis since the 1990s, including studies on relationships between language and other modalities (e.g., images, sounds, colors), and emphasized its interdisciplinary nature, integrating theories from linguistics, communication, and cognitive psychology [8]. Zhang Delu proposed a comprehensive framework for multimodal discourse analysis, comprising cultural, situational, discursive meaning, grammatical, and media levels [9]. Based on systemic functional linguistics, this framework aims to holistically analyze the composition and functions of multimodal discourse. This paper primarily employs Zhang Delu's theoretical framework to analyze English subtitle cases in films.

III. SUBTITLE TRANSLATION STUDY OF CREATION OF THE GODS I

This paper comprehensively examines the interaction between subtitles and multiple communicative modalities (e.g., visuals, shots, music, colors) in the film from four dimensions of multi-modal discourse analysis: cultural level, contextual level, content level, and expressive level. By adopting corresponding translation strategies, it aims to accurately and completely render the source-language dialogues into the target language, enabling the target language to serve the same functions as the source language in advancing the plot, expressing characters' emotions and personalities, and constructing the communicative meaning of the film discourse.

A. Cultural Level

The theoretical framework of multi-modal discourse analysis provides a comprehensive, interdisciplinary approach to analyzing how different modalities co-construct meaning [9]. As a medium for cultural transmission, film and television works integrate multiple semantic symbols such as linguistic information, visual backgrounds, and music. To convey the cultural information embedded in the source language as much as possible, translators may prioritize domestication strategies in subtitle translation—replacing source-language imagery with metaphors familiar to the target audience and using free translation to help viewers better understand the thematic ideas and connotations of the film, thus achieving functional equivalence with the source language. For example: “此物有回天之力，唯有“天下共主”方可开启。” is translated as “It had the power to save the world and could only be opened by the King of All Realms.” This translation leverages visual modality and scene design to overlook partial cultural specificity. For instance, “回天之力” (lit. “the power to reverse the heavens”) is generalized to the universal “save the world”, weakening the mystery of the Investiture of the Gods list and emphasizing its functionality. The film visuals depict the origin of the list through murals, creating a mysterious atmosphere. As one of the ancient ways to record history, murals also enhance the authenticity of the myth. The translation thus de-emphasizes the mythical sense of “回天之力” and adds a realistic sense of “saving the world”.

B. Contextual Level

In specific communicative scenarios, discourse is constrained by contextual factors, including the field, tenor, and mode of discourse [9]. Successful subtitle translation relies on diverse contextual elements, encompassing not only in-film contexts but also the sociocultural backgrounds of the audience. Hu Zhuanglin categorizes context into co-textual, situational, and cultural contexts, highlighting its role as a critical constraint in multi-modal communication. Context comprises linguistic (i.e., co-text) and non-linguistic (i.e., subjective/objective factors) dimensions, with the latter integrating visual scenes, audio environments, character psychology, and facial expressions to construct discursive meaning [10]. Thus, integrating contextual factors is pivotal for subtitle translation to convey holistic discourse.

The contextual level is primarily reflected in personal pronoun shifts, where translators compensate for co-textual context through pronominal adjustment. For example:

Source Text: 启儿，启儿为我舞剑助兴。

Translation: My son... my dearest son dances for me!

This dialogue occurs during a victory banquet for Yin Shou, where Daji manipulates Yin Qi to perform sword dancing. The repeated address “启儿” with the diminutive “儿” embodies the Shang king’s doting affection. The translation omits the name’s phonetic transcription, using “my son” to clarify the relationship. The addition of “dearest” compensates for the emotional intensity lost by replacing Chinese repetition, directly conveying adoration (vs. Chinese implicitness) and foreshadowing Yin Shou’s later resentment toward his father’s favoritism. The term “舞剑” is simplified to “dance” to align with Western associations

of “dance” as performative flattery, with the visual modality of sword-wielding compensating for the omitted cultural symbol. In a subsequent scene, when Ji Fa greets the Snow Dragon Horse brought by Bo Yikao:

In the non-linguistic environment of the film, that is, the situational context, Chinese subtitles emphasize the process, while the translation emphasizes the result. For example:

Source Text: 对着城头大声说。

Translation: Louder, so they can hear you.

Yin Shou urges Su Hu to shout toward the city wall to persuade his father to surrender. The translation “Louder” directly targets volume, reinforced by auditory echoes in the film. The added purpose (“so they can hear you”) complements visuals, as the city wall is already shown, avoiding redundancy. Fog and distance in the scene further enhance the war atmosphere. When Su Hu pleads “父亲，降吧”，the translation “Father! Please surrender!” adds “Please” and an exclamation mark to mirror his kneeling gesture, with subsequent arrow volleys replacing verbal response via visual symbolism.

C. Content Level

The content level comprises the discursive meaning level and the formal level [11]. At the discursive meaning level, there are ideational meaning, interpersonal meaning, and textual meaning constrained by the field of discourse, tenor of discourse, and mode of discourse [9]. Since subtitle translation focuses on verbal content, interjections, personal names, and address terms can often be omitted. In film discourse, the formal level is primarily manifested as auditory modalities (e.g., music, speech, sound effects) and visual modalities (e.g., images, text). The content level, centered on discursive meaning, involves constructing ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings. In the film, language shapes the image of Yin Jiao respecting his father. For example, the rhetorical question “他岂会不知” (How could he not know?) is translated as “Surely he must know that” in the context: “I asked him to pass the throne to me so I could die in his place. Surely he must know that.” Ironically, Yin Shou (Yin Jiao’s father) is unaware, misinterpreting his son’s motive as a power grab. When Yin Shou later confronts Yin Jiao, the response “孩儿不敢” (Your son wouldn’t dare) is rendered as “I would never!”, with “never” emphasizing Yin Jiao’s loyalty and submission. The character’s forceful delivery in the visual modality further reinforces his adoration for his father.

The formal level integrates auditory modalities (music, intonation, sound effects) and visual modalities (images, animations, text), forming a multi-modal system with subtitles to convey discursive meaning. In the Kunlun Mountain scene, where twelve immortals discuss humanity’s impending catastrophe at Yuxu Palace and descend with the Investiture list, the translator uses concise subtitles. The visuals feature ethereal, misty landscapes with invisible immortals, complemented by otherworldly voice-overs. This multi-modal interaction—blending abstract visuals, ethereal audio, and minimalist text—embodies the film’s mythological themes, demonstrating how formal elements co-construct communicative meaning.

D. Expressive Level

From the perspective of traditional linguistic research, there are two main media for meaning transmission: linguistic and non-linguistic media. Linguistic media include pure language (sound and text) and para-language (audio effects, intonation, font, layout), while non-linguistic media encompass body language and non-body language (e.g., props, environment). In films, auxiliary elements such as tone intensity, sound effects, and subtitle layout enhance emotional conveyance, serving as primary vehicles for linguistic information [9]. Subtitle translators must therefore integrate linguistic media features—including audio pitch, intonation, font size/shape, and screen layout—that supplement and reinforce information transmission [12].

Subtitle timing should align with plot progression and visual transitions for readability. Source and target language subtitles are typically positioned at the screen bottom, with English limited to two lines and Chinese to one. Bilingual subtitles not only provide information cues but also facilitate cross-cultural comprehension [13]. In *Creation of the Gods I*, subtitles appear below the screen with Chinese above English, timed to allow reading. The term “封神榜” poses a challenge: its full translation is cumbersome for repeated use. Strategies like acronyms (e.g., “IOG”) or transliteration (“Feng Shen Bang”) are adopted, analogous to *Game of Thrones* (“GOT”). Transliteration preserves Chinese phonology, with the first appearance ideally annotated (though the film uses this on posters instead), balancing comprehensibility and conciseness.

Beyond linguistic media, translators must consider non-linguistic media (e.g., body language, props, settings) (Zhang Delu, 2009). When Yin Shou asks his uncle Bi Gan to divine the Shang Dynasty’s fate, Bi Gan’s turtle shell cracks, prompting him to repeat “天弃我大商” (Heaven has forsaken the Shang) six times. The translation “The dynasty is doomed!” omits “天” (Heaven), instead linking dynastic decline to natural omens. This aligns with visuals of darkening skies, conveying ancient Chinese beliefs about heaven-earth interconnection to global audiences through multi-modal synergy.

IV. CONCLUSION

Subtitles, interacting with visual, acoustic, and chromatic symbols, co-construct the central meaning of cinematic discourse. Analyzing the subtitle translation of *Creation of the Gods I: Kingdom of Storms* through the lens of multi-modal discourse analysis reveals that the Chinese-English translation predominantly employs free translation. Chinese

emphasizes process, while English subtitles prioritize results. Translators adjust person deixis based on character relationships and visual cues to enhance cross-cultural comprehensibility, and manipulate lexical addition/omission to modulate emotional intensity.

The strategic choice of free translation, combined with multi-modal elements (e.g., visuals, audio), optimizes the cultural transmission function of films, demonstrating how multi-modal translation theory facilitates both plot comprehension and appreciation of Chinese cultural aesthetics.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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