

# A Study on the Subtitle Translation of the Film *Death Poetry Society* From Skopos Theory

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Film is not only a carrier of culture, but also an important medium for cultural communication, playing an increasingly important role in cross-cultural communication. *Death Poetry Society* is an inspirational film directed by Peter Weir Robin. The film is based on the theme of secondary school education, and tells the story of the Romanticist teacher Keating who leads the students to explore themselves and pursue the truth. Based on the analysis of the film's subtitle translation characteristics, this paper applies the principle of Skopos Theory to conduct an in-depth study of the subtitle translation of the film *Death Poetry Society* and analyzes the strategies adopted by translators in film subtitle translation under the perspective of Skopos Theory. Using the three principles of Skopos Theory as a theoretical guide, this paper studies and discusses various translation methods used in film translation by comparing and analyzing the original subtitles and translation of *Death Poetry Society*, aiming to provide reference for improving the quality of subtitle translation of such film and television works.

**Keywords:** Skopos Theory, *Dead Poets Society*, subtitle translation strategies

## Introduction

With the development of international cultural exchanges, we are more and more interested in the cultures of other countries. The dissemination of film and television works play a key role in cultural dissemination. In order to help more works go global and allow people around the world to enjoy unique exotic customs, subtitle translation plays a unique and different role in advancing the transmission of culture.

## Research Background and Signification

Since the 21st century, globalization, especially cultural globalization, has been on the rise. In this context, the quality of film subtitle translation directly influences cross-cultural communication. Good translation enhances foreign films, making the viewing experience better and promoting cultural exchange.

In order to let readers further realize the importance of film subtitle translation, the author selects the subtitle translation of the spiritual growth film *Death Poetry Society*, which is well known to Chinese audiences. This paper takes Skopos Theory as the guiding theory to analyze the subtitle translation of this film. The author hopes to make readers better understand the role of English film subtitle translation in the communication of Chinese and foreign culture.

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## Research Aim and Content

At present, there were few researches on English subtitle translation of the coming-of-age film *Death Poetry Society* in China. First of all, compared with western academic circles, domestic subtitle translation has not received due attention and lacks a systematic theoretical system and authoritative official translation institutions. Secondly, there are huge differences between Chinese and western cultures. As an emerging research field, subtitle translation is being promoted to a high level by domestic scholars. Although it has been studied from some angles, there is still room for research.

Therefore, in order to meet the urgent demand for Chinese-English subtitle translation in China and provide references for research in the field of English-Chinese subtitle translation, this article uses the *Death Poetry Society* as an example. This paper analyzes film translation from the perspective of Skopos Theory, discusses the characteristics of subtitle translation, analyzes the relationship between Skopos Theory and translation, and expounds the subtitle translation skills of the *Death Poetry Society*.

## Literature Review

This paper studies through a large number of literature, and finds about the film subtitle translation and Skopos Theory related overview, from the perspective of Skopos Theory when subtitle translation needs to adhere to the purpose principle, coherence principle, and loyalty principle.

### Studies on Skopos Theory

Skopos Theory is a relatively new translation theory model developed by German translation theorist Han Vermeer.

This theory basically belongs to an external study of translation, which focuses on the selection of various purposes in the process of translation. Therefore, it can undoubtedly make up for the shortcomings of traditional translation studies and thus add a new research perspective to the multidisciplinary exploration of translation. (Vermeer, 2003, p. 78)

Compared with traditional and mainstream language translation theories, Functional Skopos Theory provides a new perspective for translation studies to view translation studies from a more functional and socio-cultural perspective.

There are three important principles of Skopos Theory, namely, the principle of purpose, the principle of coherence, the principle of fidelity.

### Introduction to Subtitle and Subtitle Translation

Western scholars have different definitions of subtitles. According to the scholar Jacobson, “subtitles are interpretations of phonetic symbols in other languages” (Jacobson, 2011, p. 91). In short, subtitle translation refers to the dialogue in the form of text in TV, film, and other works, generally referring to the dialogue in the processing of film and television works.

Subtitles can be classified into three types by the location of subtitles in a movie. The first category is the opening credits. It appears in the opening credits, including the title of the film, the director, the main actors and actresses, and the main producers. The second and most important category is... (Ruba, 2022, p. 4)

Opening credits introduce the movie; closing credits appear at the end with production details. Subtitles can be intra-lingual (within the same language) or inter-lingual (between different languages).

Scholar Vichy defined that subtitle translation is the translation of dialogue, monologue, character introduction and other content in film and television works into the language of the target country, and then according to the characteristics of film and television subtitle language in the form of text at the bottom of the screen. It is a form of translation to help foreign audiences enjoy films and dramas from other countries. (Lei & Zhao, 2021, p. 23)

### **Studies on Subtitle Translation Home and Abroad**

“Since 1995, when it was finally established as a separate research field, subtitle translation of film and television works has received extensive attention in the translation circle” (Wang, Wei, & Xue, 2022, p. 8). It is not difficult to see from the data that domestic scholars have paid more and more attention to film and television subtitle translation in the last decade. At the same time, although the number of published papers has risen sharply, the number of published papers in influential core journals has decreased.

In recent decade, most studies on subtitle translation have been combined with translation theories. “By combing through the articles on subtitle translation in recent years, we found that the research theories include Functional Equivalence Theory, Ecological Translation Theory, Conformism Theory, Functional Purpose Theory, etc.” (Wang, 2022, p. 8).

Danish scholar divided subtitle translation into intra-language subtitle translation and interlanguage subtitle translation. Intra-lingual subtitle translation only changes the expression form of the same language, while interlingual subtitle translation converts between different languages.

Scholar Yang Min (2019) discussed the application strategies of Skopos Theory in English movie subtitle translation from three aspects: Principle of Purpose; Principle of Consistency; Principle of Fidelity, so as to realize the translation to guarantee the formal and semantic equivalence to the maximum extent, while preserving the respective cultural characteristics of the original text and the translated text, so as to make the translation achieve the form and meaning as much as possible. (Shi, 2020, p. 98)

Subtitle translation descriptively and interpretively from three aspects of conformity: linguistic context, situational context, and cultural context, based on Vesolon’s Theory of Conformity, which played an active role in guiding flexible subtitle translation. It is pointed out that ecology is a whole, and subtitle translation is also a whole, which needs to harmonize the language, culture, and customs of both countries, so she grasped the wholeness of subtitle translation according to the language dimension, cultural dimension, and communicative dimension, and translators can adapt by “adaptive selection” and “selective adaptation. The translator retains the translation with the highest degree of “integrated adaptation choice” through “adaptive selection” and “selective adaptation”, thus building a bridge for Chinese films to “Go global”.

### **Translation Strategies of Subtitles in Dead Poets Society Under Skopos Theory**

#### **Translation Strategies Based on Skopos Rule**

The Skopos Theory holds that translation should abide by the principle of “means of purpose interpretation”. The translator should realize the whole translation process under the guidance of various purposes. As far as subtitle translation is concerned, the Skopos Theory is to enable the audience to capture the information provided by the film quickly and to the greatest extent within the limited time and space. Based on this principle, metaphor and symbolism translation are adopted.

**Metaphor.** A metaphor is a kind of simile in which one thing is used to allude to another thing. Poetry, especially since the modern era, has important characteristics in terms of word pairings, preferring to break through the customary connections between words and phrases and to link things that seem unrelated.

## Example 1.

Source text: “Carpe diem, seize the day, boys, make your lives extraordinary”.

Translation: 把握今朝，抓住现在，年轻人，去创造不同凡响的人生。

In the movie, Keating delivers one of the golden lines in movie history as he shows Wilton school students a black-and-white photo of their alumni. “Carpe diem” comes from the Odes written by Horace in 23 BC. The original text, written in Latin, translates into Chinese as: “采下这一天，别指望明天”. “Carpe diem” is literally translated into English as “pluck the day”. “Pluck” means to pick, for example, “pluck the flower (摘花)”. “Flower” is often used as a metaphor for beautiful youth. Today, “carpe diem” is often used as a metaphor for “及时行乐” or “把握当下”.

**Symbolism.** Using a specific image of something to suggest a specific person or reason, in order to express sincere feelings and profound meaning, this kind of artistic expression with things is called symbol. “The performance effect of symbol is: profound meaning, can enrich people’s association, intriguing, so that people get endless sense of artistic conception. Can give people a concise, vivid sense of feeling, can express sincere feelings” (Wu, 2021, p. 117).

## Example 2.

Source text: “Oh, captain, my captain! Gather ye rosebuds while ye may. Old time is still a-flying. And this same flowers that smiles today”.

Translation: 船长！我的船长！请及时采撷你的花蕾；旧时光一去不回；今天尚在微笑的花朵；明天却在风中枯萎。

“Oh! Captain! My captain!” (《船长！我的船长！》) is the theme poem in *Dead Poets Society*. Keating wants students to call him “Captain”, which is a status symbol. The relationship between captain and passenger, or captain and sailor, is closer than that of teacher and student, but more distant than that of friend. Keating hopes to get closer to his students through such a symbol of relationship, while preserving their subjectivity and independence.

### Translation Strategies Based on Coherence Rule

The principle of coherence is consistency. It requires semantic coherence in the translation. The translator should make the translation have meaning, and let the subtitles be fluent and smooth, in line with the audience’s language habits and language logic. Under the guidance of the coherence rule, the translation applies the liberal translation and amplification technique. After the translator’s clever treatment, the translation gets rid of the bondage of the original. “On the premise of respecting the original text, subtitle translation achieves a clearer and more authentic content and a more natural and fluent expression” (Wu, 2018, p. 79).

#### Liberal translation.

Liberal translation means translating according to the general meaning of the original text, without word-by-word translation (as distinct from direct translation). It is usually used when translating sentences, phrases or larger groups of meanings, and is mainly applied in cases where the original language and the translated language reflect great cultural differences.

## Example 3.

Source text: “We weren’t a Greek organization. We were Romantics. We didn’t just read poetry, we let it drip from our tongues like honey. Spirits soared, women swooned and gods were created”.

Translation: 我们是一群浪漫主义者。我们不仅仅念诗，诗歌会从我们舌间滑落，就像蜜糖。所有爱诗之人情绪高涨，女人亢奋，灵魂驰骋。

Greek organization is a nickname for boring people, and the translator omitted this sentence in favor of “We were Romantics”. The words “drip from” correspond to “滑落”, which reflects the beauty of Chinese. The translator gives the poem a dynamic state and makes the audience feel the rhythm of the poem. Then again, the word “灵魂驰骋” to describe the “gods were created” could not be more apt. This directly translates into Chinese as “神被创造出来”, which lacks beauty and uniqueness. But after the translator’s liberal translation, the soul impact brought by poetry is perfectly expressed” (Xu, 2018, p. 142).

**Amplification.** Amplification refers to the addition of omitted parts in the original text, which mainly includes the addition of category words to clarify the meaning, the addition of related words or context-related content words to strengthen the connection, and the addition of explanatory words to meet the needs of structural balance, logical rationality or rhetoric.

Example 4.

Source text: “What you know isn’t always what is important, but living and growing. Living your life. Treating yourself. Adventure”.

Translation: 一个人的专长不见得是最重要的，重要的是生活和成长。享受人生，善待自己，勇于冒险。

In order to avoid repetition, English uses more concise words, while Chinese uses parallelism to enhance rhythm. Here, the first two clauses of the second half of English are verbs plus nouns or pronouns, but the end is a single noun sentence. When it was translated into Chinese, the verb “勇于” was added for structural balance. This arrangement, reading cadence, catchy, not only in line with the collocation habit, but also maintain the consistent format, so that the text has ornamental. Meanwhile, it also makes the overall expression more coherent and complete, and improves the readability and fluency of the language.

### Translation Strategies Based on Fidelity Rule

The fidelity principle seeks to achieve coherence between the original text and the target text, and requires the target text to be faithful to the original text and not completely separate from the original text. The degree and form of fidelity depend on the purpose of the translation and the translator’s understanding of the original text.

#### Literal translation.

Literal translation is often used to translate some terms and idioms, sometimes limited to simple sentences and technical terms. Literal translation can completely maintain the style and national characteristics of the original. But literal translation must be readable, that is to say, the translation will not cause readers to misunderstand. (Wu, 2021, p. 67)

“Literal translation is also suitable for rhetorical sentences. To some extent, literal translation can not only maintain the characteristics of the original text, but also enable readers to gradually accept the literary style of the original text” (Sheldon, 2020, p. 14).

Example 5.

Source text: “They call me the ‘Uncommon Denominator’”.

Translation: 他们称我为“不凡的分母”。

“Uncommon” means “不寻常的、不凡的”; “denominator” means “分母”. Here, the translator took the literal translation method and translated “Uncommon Denominator” into “不凡的分母”, which retains the exotic denominator of the original sentence and reflects the principle of fidelity.

## Example 6.

Source text: “You take a very handsome guy, or a guy that thinks he’s a real hot-shot, and they’re always asking you to do them a big favor”.

Translation: 有一种长得十分漂亮的家伙，或者一种自以为了不起的人物，他们老是要求别人大大帮他一个忙。

“A very handsome guy” is not part of slang, but it is a very common phrase in English. Since English is much simpler and unadorned than Chinese, this phrase shows a very plain style. Translator translated it as “长得十分漂亮的家伙” without some flashy words to embellish it, not only expressing its literal meaning, but also using simple Chinese to keep the same style as the original. Such a translation can realize the principle of re-fidelity to the maximum.

**Naturalization.** The so-called domestication translation is idiomatic and localized the source language. The translator should take the target language readers as his destination and present the source content in the way readers are used to according to the language habits and cultural traditions of the target language. The translator should approach the target language readers and process the source text with the idiom of the native readers, so as to reduce the comprehension difficulty of the readers to the foreign works, reduce the comprehension difficulty caused by cultural and linguistic differences, and meet the needs of the readers to the greatest extent.

## Example 7.

Source text: “That’s my little scholar”.

Translation: 真是我的小秀才。

The original meaning of “scholar” refers to “学者”, which is translated as “秀才” by the domesticated translation method here. “秀才” is a traditional Chinese official selection subject, meaning “优秀的人才”. In modern times it means a person who is knowledgeable and intelligent. This kind of translation contains Chinese traditional culture and brings us closer to the audience. “That’s” is also translated as “真是” rather than “那是”, which first emphasizes the tone and also shows the teacher’s satisfaction and pride in the students’ excellent results.

## Conclusions

Film and TV are crucial for China’s global communication. Subtitle translation boosts their impact. As China expands its global presence, the demand for film and TV series increases, elevating the importance of subtitle translation. Translators can enhance cultural exchange by understanding subtitles, using research and Skopos Theory to improve translation quality.

### Research Findings

First of all, the preface of the subtitles will set the tone, so that the audience can overcome the language barrier and understand the connotation of the film and television works. In addition, subtitles can also transfer foreign culture. “As a part of cultural exchange, subtitle translation can realize the cultural transformation between the source language and the target language. Finally, it is to convey exotic customs and introduce customs” (Wu, 2022, p. 47). By watching the subtitles of movies and TV series, the audience can get a vivid experience and feel the real exotic customs.

In a word, the Skopos Theory dominates the translation behavior of subtitle. In order to achieve the ultimate goal of subtitle translation, the translator should process the information of film and television works according to the customs and traditions of the target language. (Shi, 2021, p. 5)

### Research Limitations

This paper discusses some subtitle translation examples, but it's subjective. It mainly focuses on translation effects, lacking insight into audience reactions to "Dead Poets Society". Further research is needed for credibility. In conclusion, subtitle translation involves condensing text and infusing spoken form into written form, distinguishing it from other types of translation.

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