



# The Subtitle Translation of *Hi, Mom* (《你好，李焕英》) from the Perspective of Catford Theory

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## Abstract

As an important way to show national characteristics and spread national culture, the film and television industry plays an important role in cross-cultural communication. With the time passing, the public's demand for the quality of movie and television translation is getting higher and higher. *Hi, Mom*, a movie released across the border, plays an active role in exporting Chinese culture and showing Chinese characteristics. Its subtitle translation also plays an important role at the same time, and national films can achieve the function of cultural dissemination through subtitle translation. This paper will study and analyze the two levels (grammar and vocabulary) and four categories (unit, structure, category and system) of Catford's theory of translation, with a view to providing certain insights into the related subtitle translation research.

## Subject Areas

Translation

## Keywords

Catford's Translation Shifts Theory, Cultural Dissemination, Category Shifts

## 1. Introduction

Since China's reform and opening up, domestic movies have been flourishing, which are characterized by Chinese culture and highlight Chinese characteristics, and are gradually going international, so subtitle translation plays a vital role in the dissemination of Chinese and foreign cultures. More and more people begin to study subtitle translation. In recent years, the Chinese classic movie *Hi,*

*Mom*, a story from director Jia Ling's own real-life, reunited with her mother across time and space about great maternal love, has remained an unsurpassed classic since its release. This paper studies the movie subtitle translation of this movie on the basis of Catford's translation theory.

## 2. Subtitle Translation

### 2.1. Characteristics of Subtitle Translation

Movie is a comprehensive art form with distinctive cultural characteristics. Subtitle translation is a kind of interlingual information transfer activity, which is characterized by transience, popularity and popularization [1] [2], and subtitle translation should follow the artistry of language, the correct processing of cultural information, and the condensation and simplification of language [3]. As the movie is limited by time and space, the target language subtitles should not be too long, and it is appropriate to control them to 1 - 2 lines, so that the target language audience can read them in 2 - 3 seconds [4]. Therefore, the translation should be concise to highlight the key points, but also consistent with the original picture and in line with the story scenario. There are some humorous dialogues and regional dialects in the movie, and the connotative messages behind them may make it difficult for the target language audience to understand. Thus, the translator should fully understand these messages and use appropriate additions to fill in the gaps to ensure that the target language audience has a deep understanding of the movie.

### 2.2. Principles of Subtitle Translation

First, faithfulness. Faithfulness means that the translator should write exactly what the original author wants to express, and at the same time the style of the translation corresponds to the original, as well as, the translation should have a certain degree of fluency. Of course, faithfulness is not the complete equivalence of word for word, but to express the information honestly and convey the original meaning of the author, which is what the translator should do.

Second, simplicity. Movie subtitles are more often than not subject to multiple limitations of time and space, so there is not much time and space to play, and the translator must be concise in his expression, without a sense of redundancy. Avoiding procrastination is also an important skill for translators to master. In subtitle translation, this becomes a principle that has to be obeyed, after all, subtitle translation is different from ordinary literary translation, the picture and subtitle appear at the same time in the movie, which is already very difficult for the audience, if the subtitle content is obscure and difficult to understand, then the subtitle has become an obstacle for the audience to watch the movie.

Third, less annotation. There are differences between many languages and cultures, so many translators like to use notes to help readers understand, the purpose of these notes is to further explain the textual information, such as the preface, footnotes, in-text interpretation and so on. Doing so allows for explan-

atory notes to be made with limited text, breaking down the barrier of cultural differences. Accurate subtitle translation has successfully realized the “going out” of Chinese culture while accurately conveying the message of the film.

### 2.3. The Significance of Subtitle Translation

Subtitle translation, as an important language translation technology, can provide viewers with a complete viewing experience, so that the film and television works in cross-cultural communication. The significance of subtitle translation mainly lies in solving the language barriers in cross-language communication, helping people understand and comprehend the information and culture expressed in different languages.

## 3. Reasons for Choosing

*Hi, mom* is a film deeply rooted in Chinese culture and family values. By telling the life changes of an ordinary family since the reform and opening up, it shows the importance Chinese people attach to family, affection, friendship and traditional culture. This strong cultural representation makes it an ideal object for studying cultural transmission and adaptability in subtitle translation. Moreover, the language style of the film is humorous, integrating a large number of dialects, slang and idioms, which need special treatment in subtitle translation to maintain its original linguistic charm and humorous effect. Therefore, how to maintain the cultural characteristics of the original work while enabling the audience to understand and accept the message and emotion conveyed by the film across the barriers of language and culture. This will help promote cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries and enhance the international influence of Chinese films.

## 4. Introduction of the Catford's Translation Shifts Theory

As early as 1961, Halliday divided grammar into four categories: unit, structure, category and system. J. Catford followed Halliday's linguistic model to apply such categories to translation research and proposed the Theory of Translation Shifts, which mainly involves two levels (grammar and vocabulary) and four categories (unit, structure, category and system) [5]. Level Shift is mainly reflected in the transformation between vocabulary and grammar; while category transformation is divided into category transformation, structure transformation, unit transformation and internal system transformation. Through level shift, obscure vocabulary can become more fluent. Due to the differences between the target language and the source language in terms of language structure and expression form, it is difficult for the two to achieve equivalence in terms of language form and content at the same time in the process of translation. Therefore, translation is essentially the maximization of equivalence between source language and target language through shifts [6].

## 5. The Application of Catford's Translation Shifts Theory to the Subtitle Translation of *Hi, Mom*

### 5.1. Level Shifting

It refers to the transformation between the source language and the target language at different levels, mainly between vocabulary and grammar. English contains changes in tense and singular and plural, while Chinese has no such changes, so it needs to be converted accordingly. Chinese is an ideographic language, where the language changes are hidden in the semantics, while English, on the contrary, is a morpho-syntactic language, where the language changes are usually expressed in tense, so the translator should use the appropriate target grammar and vocabulary to express the source language when translating.

Example 1: 我俩都在这儿待了十多年了。

Version: We've been here for more than ten years.

Example 2: 我跟文田在一起已经三年了。

Version: Wentian and I have been together for three years.

Analysis: The original text through “了” and “已经” to indicate the order in which actions occur. In English, tense changes are often used to indicate the time of action. According to the background of the original text, the present perfect can properly describe the time when “待” and “在一起” actions occur, and express Chinese words with English grammatical structures, enabling a level transition between the two languages.

### 5.2. Category Shifting

Category shift can be further divided into four kinds of conversion: structure, category, unit and internal system shift. The author only discusses the first three types of shifting in relation to the movie *Hi, mom*.

#### 5.2.1. Structure Shifting

Known as grammatical structure shift, it is the most frequent category shift in the translation language level and is widely used in translation. According to Reference [7], it aims at adjusting certain sentence structures of the translated language to better realize the equivalence between the translation and the original. Active-passive, person-object, and affirmative-negative conversions are all common structural shifts.

Example 4: 我喜欢女儿。

Version: A daughter would be great.

Analysis: In Example 4, “女儿” is the object in the original, but in the translation, the position of the object in the original is changed to the subject in the translation. The context of this sentence is that Jia Xiaoling asks Li Huanying whether she wants a son or a daughter in the future, and at this time Jia Xiaoling doesn't know that her mother has traveled to the 1980s with her, so the translation uses daughter as the subject to emphasize the mother's love for her child.

Example 5: 看个电视高兴成这样

Version: Never knew watching TV is this much fun.

Example 6: 而且我说的特别明白。

Version: It couldn't have been clearer.

Analysis: These two examples express positive meanings in Chinese, but they are converted into negative meanings in the translation. There are many negative words, such as never, not, no, etc., which are used to express negative meanings in both English and Chinese. For example, never, not, no, etc. in English are used to express the negative meaning, while “不是” “无” “没有”, etc. in Chinese are also used to express the negative meaning, but the specific meaning will be different according to the context, which expresses the opposite meaning of the sentence itself. Therefore, the translator should first consider the real meaning of the sentence when translating.

In Example 5, Li Huanying bought the first TV in the workshop in the 1980s, which reflects that watching TV was a luxury at that time, so when Li Huanying was watching TV and laughing with others, Jia Xiaoling said, “看个电视高兴成这样”, which was translated as a sentence containing “never”. So when Li Huanying was watching TV and laughing with the others, Jia Xiaoling said, “I'm so happy to watch TV”, which is translated into a sentence containing “never”, but it shows that watching TV is a very new and rare thing for them. Example 6 is a very common negative construction in English: not + comparative, which is a very positive statement. In English, the phrase “I can't agree with you more” is often translated as “我非常同意你。”

### 5.2.2. Category Shifting

Known as lexical conversion, is very common in English-Chinese translation. It is difficult for the source language and the target language to achieve the exact same lexical translation, and translators can usually use this kind of conversion method, that is, by changing different lexical properties in the translation process, the translation will be more fluent and in line with the reading habits of the target language readers. Common category conversion is mainly between verbs, nouns, adverbs and adjectives.

Example 7: 我必须得讲两句了。

Version: I'd like to make a speech.

In this example, “讲” is a verb, which belongs to dynamic language, while in the translation, the verb is converted to a noun “speech”, which belongs to static language, and it is in line with the characteristics of Chinese meaning and English form.

### 5.2.3. Unit Shifting

It refers to the translation of a certain linguistic hierarchical unit in the source language into another hierarchical unit in the target language. English grammatical levels include morphemes, words, phrases, clauses and sentences, while

Chinese grammatical levels are different, including morphemes, words, phrases, sentences and sentence groups. For example, English words are converted into Chinese phrases, or sentences; English clauses are converted into Chinese phrases and so on.

Example 8: 要是遇上一个好导演, 这一提拔, 可了不得呀。

Version: With the right director, plus a little luck, who knows what she'll accomplish?

Wang Qin said when she learned that Jia Xiaoling had been admitted to the Capital Theater Academy. The word “遇上” and “提拔” are verbs, and the translation treats the whole sentence as a verb, with. In other words, the Chinese verb is converted into an English adverbial phrase.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper combines Catford's Translation Shifts Theory with specific examples of subtitle translation of the movie *Hi, Mom* and finds that it can provide a very good guide to solve many problems caused by the differences between Chinese and English in Chinese subtitle translation, thus further promoting the Chinese translation practice. It is hoped that more subtitle translators can adopt the Catford's Translation Shifts Theory as their own guidance. At the same time, under the guidance of Catford's translation transformation theory, subtitle translation will pay more attention to the study of cultural adaptability in the future. Translators need to have a deep understanding of the differences between the source and the target language culture. Through reasonable translation strategies and methods, subtitle translation can not only retain the cultural characteristics of the original text, but also conform to the acceptance habits of the target language audience. Moreover, subtitle translation involves the knowledge and skills of linguistics, cultural communication, film and television arts and other disciplines. And, subtitle translation will pay more attention to interdisciplinary cooperation and communication, and form a joint force to promote the development of subtitle translation.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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