



# Applying Interpersonal Function Theory in Film Subtitle Translation

## —A Study of *Good Will Hunting*

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### Abstract

This paper investigates the application of interpersonal function theory from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) in English-Chinese film subtitle translation, with a focus on the film *Good Will Hunting*. By examining how mood, modality, and polarity function in film dialogue, the study demonstrates how these elements help convey interpersonal meanings and emotional dynamics between characters. The paper illustrates, through a detailed analysis of 15 examples, that translating interpersonal meaning accurately is crucial for preserving the emotional tone, character relationships, and subtle narrative dynamics of the original text, revealing that adjustments, such as incorporating mood particles, handling expletives, and translating rhetorical questions, are vital to ensuring the intended emotional and interpersonal messages are delivered effectively in the target language. This study highlights the importance of contextual equivalence and provides practical strategies for improving the quality of subtitle translation, suggesting that a focus on interpersonal function theory enhances the authenticity and emotional engagement of film subtitles. Ultimately, the paper advocates for a more nuanced, context-driven approach to subtitle translation that prioritizes interpersonal meaning, cultural nuances, and emotional depth.

### Subject Areas

Culture, Literature

### Keywords

Film Subtitle Translation, Interpersonal Function Theory, Modality, *Good Will Hunting*

## 1. Introduction

As a distinctive art form, film blends sound, imagery, and language. Beyond serving as mere mass entertainment, films have the potential to educate viewers by prompting self-reflection. In recent years, cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries have increased significantly. Films, as crucial cultural vehicles, have flourished in this environment, with a growing number of foreign-language films being introduced into China. As an essential element of films—particularly foreign ones—subtitles play a vital role in fostering cultural exchange, making subtitle translation a crucial part of the process of cross-cultural communication. Film translation possesses unique characteristics compared to other literary forms, such as the use of colloquial language, irreversibility, and integration. These features must be carefully considered during the translation process.

In addition, systemic-functional grammar (SFG) offers valuable insights into the structure and meaning of language. By focusing on meaning and the functional aspects of language, SFG places significant emphasis on the sociological dimensions of language use. Analyzing the interplay between language, function, and context in film translation can provide a deeper theoretical and practical understanding of the field. Given this context, exploring how to achieve high-quality film subtitle translation is essential to enhance cultural exchange.

Since its inception, Systemic-Functional Linguistics (SFL) has made significant strides, both in its development as a theory and in its integration with translation studies. However, the application of SFL, particularly in the context of film translation, has not yet been explored in depth.

This paper uses the classic film *Good Will Hunting*, which won the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay, as the primary research material. The analysis will focus on the original subtitle translation of the film, which will be evaluated and refined based on the interpersonal function theory of SFL. The goal of this study is to optimize the original translation and demonstrate the practical feasibility of applying interpersonal function theory to the field of film subtitle translation. Ultimately, this research aims to provide valuable insights into future movie translation practices. The subtitle resources used for this analysis are sourced from YYeTs (<https://yyets.com/>), a widely recognized platform in China for distributing fan-translated subtitles of *Good Will Hunting*.

## 2. Studies on Subtitle Translation and Interpersonal Meaning

### 2.1. Studies of Film Subtitle Translation

With the growth of global film consumption, subtitles have become a vital element in film translation. Film subtitles have three key features: immediacy, synchronicity, and popularity. Subtitles are written representations of the original audio-visual text, placed at the bottom of the screen, allowing viewers to read in their native language while listening to the original dialogue (Gottlieb [1]).

Film subtitle translation research has expanded rapidly in Western countries, driven by technological advances and a keen interest in language. Many research

institutes have emerged, focusing on film subtitle translation, and numerous academic papers have been published. Gambier [2], a leading figure in multimedia translation studies, views multimedia translation as a new area of research, examining the role of multimodal resources in audiovisual studies.

Kovacic [3] combines Halliday's functional linguistics with subtitle analysis, focusing on the linguistic aspects of film translation. Chaume [4] introduced a translation framework based on the semiotic signs of film language. More recently, scholars like Karamitroglou [5] have drawn on Zohar's polysystem theory to open new research paths for film subtitle translation.

In China, the translation industry has a long history, and the study of film translation has grown as cross-cultural exchanges increase. Professor Qian Shaochang [6], a pioneer in subtitle translation in China, compared film language with written language and shared his translation experiences. Zhang Chunbai [7] highlighted the immediacy and prevalence of screen language.

Ma Zhengqi's [8] research on film translation was one of the first systematic studies in China, detailing five key features of film translation. Li Yunxing [9] analyzed subtitle translation through discourse theory, emphasizing transliteration for cultural terms. Zhao Chunmei [10], an editor at CCTV, identified four main challenges in subtitle translation and proposed solutions. Scholars like Long Qianhong [11] and Zhao Sumei [12] have explored subtitle translation from various theoretical perspectives, while others, like Bi Wencheng [13] and Guo Ping [14], focused on film language features.

Although film translation research in China started later than in Western countries, the field is growing rapidly and holds significant potential for development.

## 2.2. Studies of Interpersonal Function Theory

Halliday's *Introduction to Functional Grammar* marked the development of systemic functional linguistics, introducing a new way of analyzing language. One key component of this theory is the interpersonal meta-function, which focuses on how language facilitates social interaction. According to Halliday [15], language serves as a tool for communication, allowing speakers to express their opinions, manners, and relationships with the audience, which are influenced by the roles they assume—such as informing, questioning, or advising.

Egins and Slade [16] examined how mood and modality are used in conversations to convey interpersonal meaning. They noted that mood selection helps establish the speaker's social position and role. Thompson [17] further developed this by introducing the idea of "projected roles," where people adopt roles in communication that reflect their verbal behavior. Martin and White [18] expanded on Halliday's theory with his Appraisal theory, which looks at how language is used to assess phenomena, express attitudes, and maintain social relations.

In China, meta-function theory was introduced in the 1970s and has since gained popularity. Scholars like Li Zhanzi [19] have expanded on Halliday's framework, exploring interpersonal meaning from perspectives like cognition, assessments,

and interactions. Huang Guowen [20] applied Halliday's theory to study translations of the Chinese poem Qingming, demonstrating how interpersonal meaning helps readers understand characters and relationships, thus validating the translation. Zhang Meifang [21] examined how translators' attitudes influence their evaluation of source texts, showing the importance of interpersonal meaning in translation.

Research on interpersonal meaning continues to grow in China, with scholars such as Chen Qigong and Xin Chunlei [22] applying the theory to commercial advertising, and Zhong Lijun [23] to political speeches. These studies have broadened the understanding of interpersonal meaning and proven the utility of various language resources in translation.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

#### **3.1. Overview of Interpersonal Function**

The studies reviewed above indicate that while the interpersonal function of systemic functional linguistics has been widely applied to text analysis and translation, its application to film translation remains limited. Among the three main meta-functions, the interpersonal meta-function is particularly relevant to film translation, as film dialogue primarily involves interpersonal interactions. Therefore, studying the interpersonal meaning of film dialogue is essential for effective subtitle translation. This thesis aims to explore the application of interpersonal function theory in film subtitle translation, seeking linguistic, stylistic, and cultural equivalence, and providing practical strategies for improving subtitle translation.

Interpersonal function is one of the three fundamental functions of language. It is considered an interactive process that involves both the speaker and the listener, establishing relationships to either give or demand something. Interpersonal function is realized when speakers' express attitudes, evaluations, opinions, and establish various relationships through their language.

#### **3.2. Sub-Systems of Interpersonal Function**

Halliday argues that interpersonal meaning is mainly conveyed through the mood system, modality, polarity system, and pronouns. Given the constraints of time and space in film subtitles, this thesis focuses on analyzing the mood system and modality and polarity systems. The mood system is concerned with the roles of participants in the conversation, while the modality system reflects the speaker's attitude toward the propositions and proposals as well as their degree of possibility, usability, obligation, and inclination.

##### **3.2.1. Mood System**

The mood system is a key component of interpersonal meaning in functional grammar. It is a set of contrasts, typically realized through verbs, which express the speaker's perspective on the message. The mood system helps structure the clause as an interactive event.

The mood system consists of two main components: the subject and the Finite element. The subject is the entity performing the action in the clause, often represented by personal pronouns or nouns. The Finite element indicates the speaker's judgment and the tense of the sentence. The rest of the clause is the Residue, which includes complements, adjuncts, and predictive words.

The mood system allows for the exchange of information, primarily in two forms: declarative (statements) and interrogative (questions). Declarative clauses are typically formed by placing the subject before the finite verb, while interrogative clauses follow two main types: yes/no questions and WH-questions.

### **3.2.2. Modality and Polarity System**

Modal processing is the rank from positive to negative between the poles. However, the possibility is not just "yes or no". It has intermediate ranks: there are various uncertainties between the "yes or no". To some extent, it is mostly about the speaker's subjective judgment or their requirements for the audience's judgment of the state of the content being discussed. In functional grammar, modality can apply to both propositions and proposals.

In a proposition, two intermediate probabilities are often applied: practicability and possibility. The degree of the former is reflected in always, usually, sometimes, rarely, never, and so on, while the degree of the latter is expressed by the words "possible", "affirmative", "absolute", "certain", which indicates the different degrees of possibility. All of them are called modalization.

In a proposal, there are two intermediate possibilities: offers and orders. "In the former, the midpoint refers to the tendency level: willing to/anxious to/determined to; in the latter, the midpoint refers to the obligation level: allowed to/supposed to/required to." (Halliday [24]) The degree of obligation and tendency represents modulation.

Polarity refers to the choice between positive or negative, indicating extremes of agreement or disagreement. In speech, polarity helps convey consent, rejection, orders, or proposals. Positive clauses are typically neutral, while negative clauses often use expressions like "never" or "nothing."

### **3.3. Challenges in Translating Cultural Nuances and the Role of SFL**

In film subtitle translation, one of the main challenges is translating cultural nuances. Films often contain expressions, idioms, and references that are deeply tied to the source culture. These elements can be difficult to convey accurately in the target language, as they may not have direct equivalents or carry the same cultural connotations. For instance, phrases that refer to social norms, historical events, or cultural symbols may be unfamiliar to the target audience.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), particularly the interpersonal function theory, can help overcome these challenges. By focusing on mood, modality, and polarity, translators can ensure that the interpersonal dynamics, emotions, and relationships between characters are maintained, even when cultural specifics are difficult to translate. For example, SFL allows for flexibility in mood particles and

modality, enabling translators to capture the intended emotional tone or relational aspect of a conversation, even if the exact words or cultural references don't translate directly.

Moreover, SFL helps translators manage cultural differences by emphasizing contextual equivalence—ensuring that the function of the dialogue remains consistent across cultures. This approach does not just focus on linguistic accuracy but also on the context of the communication—whether it's a gesture of respect, a joke, or a cultural reference—that needs to be conveyed in a way that resonates with the target audience.

By using interpersonal function theory, translators can better navigate these cultural hurdles and maintain the authenticity and emotional depth of the original film, ensuring that the target audience receives the same emotional and interpersonal experience as the original viewers.

#### **4. Interpersonal Function Analysis of Film Subtitle Translation**

Dialogues are a central element of film, serving as a common form of interpersonal communication. Therefore, analyzing film translation through the lens of interpersonal function is highly relevant. In translation, it is crucial to preserve the interpersonal meaning in the target text to achieve textual equivalence. Interpersonal function not only conveys messages but also communicates the personalities, attitudes, social status, and relationships of characters within a communicative event. A failure to capture the interpersonal meaning from the original text will undoubtedly affect the quality of the translated text.

As discussed earlier, interpersonal function is primarily realized through the mood, modality, and polarity systems, as well as the appraisal system. However, the differences between Chinese and English expressions create challenges in achieving equivalence. These differences must be carefully considered in the context of movie subtitle translation.

In this chapter, the subtitles of the classic film *Good Will Hunting* will be analyzed using interpersonal function theory. To effectively conduct this analysis, it is important to understand the plot of the film. The story follows Will Hunting, a janitor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who has a remarkable talent for mathematics but struggles with personal rebellion. With the support of Professor Lambeau, psychologist Sean, and his friend Will, eventually open up emotionally and gain the courage to explore new possibilities in life.

This chapter will use selected dialogues as examples to demonstrate the analysis. Version 1 presents the original subtitles from YYeTs, while Version 2 is the modified version proposed by the author, guided by interpersonal function theory. For this analysis, these alternative versions were created by the author. These versions were based on the principles of interpersonal function theory from systemic functional linguistics (SFL). The aim was to show how small changes in translation, such as adding mood particles, adjusting modality, or changing declarative sen-

tences to questions, can affect the interpersonal meaning in the subtitles. The new versions aim to keep the emotional and interpersonal aspects of the original dialogue while making it fit the target language.

#### 4.1. Analysis of Film Subtitle Translation under Mood System

Mood serves as the core of interaction, carrying the responsibility of the subject and Finite Element. The subject represents the entity the speaker assigns responsibility for the validity of the proposition presented in the clause, while the Finite Element enables the subject to engage in a negotiation regarding the validity of the proposition. However, in Chinese, there is no Finite element as in English, so the mood is usually expressed by mood particles and some special structures instead of the presence and order of subject and Finite.

##### 4.1.1. Maintaining the Mood

Generally, maintaining the mood of the original film dialogue is both fundamental and essential. Through the declarative mood, the translator not only conveys the character's personality but also reflects their attitude. In Chinese, the declarative mood is typically unmarked, meaning that mood particles are not usually required at the end of a sentence. However, occasionally adding elements like “了” or “的” can make the sentence sound more natural or idiomatic. Additionally, the inclusion or omission of certain elements can significantly impact the interpersonal meaning conveyed in the translation.

Example 1:

Professor Lambeau: I also put an advanced Fourier system on the main hallway chalkboard. I'm hoping that one of you might prove it by the end of the semester. Now the person to do so will not only be in my good grace but also go on to fame and fortune by having their accomplishment recorded and their name printed in the auspicious M.I.T. Tech.

Version 1: 走廊黑板上有高级傅立叶算式，希望学期结束前有人会解。解出来的人不只有好成绩，还可以因此记录名利双收，留名麻省理工学院。

Version 2: 我把傅立叶级数写在走廊黑板上了，希望你们有人能在学期结束前解出来。他不仅会得到我的青睐，更会名利双收，扬名麻省理工。

This example is taken from Professor Lambeau's speech, where he assigns a new task to his students. As one of the main characters in the film, Professor Lambeau is a mathematics professor at M.I.T. In Version 2, the subject “I” is retained and translated as “我,” instead of omitting it like in Version 1. This choice ensures the declarative sentence properly conveys the professor's expectation, rather than sounding like a cold command without any emotional tone as in Version 1. Additionally, the inclusion of the mood particle “了” makes the sentence more natural in Chinese, especially in spoken language, fitting the context of this situation. Furthermore, the phrase “in one's good graces” means being in someone's favor or receiving their approval, not simply earning good grades. Therefore, translating it as “有好成绩” doesn't fully capture the intended meaning. “得到我的青睐” is

much more faithful to the original interpersonal meaning, emphasizing the professor's favor as a much more valuable incentive for the students than just a good grade.

The use of the interrogative mood reveals that the speaker's purpose in asking a question is to obtain information from the listener. However, in reality, the interrogative clause can also convey the character's eagerness and expectations. In Chinese, interrogative sentences typically end with mood particles such as “吗, 呢, 吧, 啊, or 呀,” among others. It would be beneficial for translators to pay attention to this feature and incorporate it into the translation process to better express the interpersonal meaning of the original film dialogue. The following examples illustrate this.

Example 2:

Sean: Do you like books?

Version 1: 你喜欢看书?

Version 2: 你喜欢看书吗?

The example above comes from the dialogue between Will and Sean during their first meeting. After Will expresses interest in the books in the office, Sean asks the question shown above. In Example 1, without the mood particle “吗,” the mood of the sentence differs from the original. “你喜欢看书?” sounds more like a surprised question, which might lead to the misunderstanding that Sean doesn't expect Will to be someone who enjoys reading. However, in the original line, it is simply a neutral question posed by Sean with the intention of learning more about Will.

Example 3:

Will: You're chucking me?

Version 1: 你在赶我?

Version 2: 你是在撵我走吗?

Similarly, in this example, the addition of the mood particle “吗” strengthens the mood and makes the sentence more idiomatic. In this scene, Sean and Will are having a psychological consultation, but Will is reluctant to share his true feelings, prompting Sean to open the door and let him leave. Will feels a bit surprised and annoyed, as he didn't expect Sean to kick him out and still wants to continue chatting casually. In this context, Version 2 is more fitting for the conversation than Version 1.

Example 4:

Sean: Better than Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent*? Do you think that's a good book?

Version 1: 比乔姆斯基的书好? 你觉得那是本好书?

Version 2: 比乔姆斯基的书更好吗? 你认为那是本好书吗?

The interrogative mood in English can be divided into two types: WH-interrogative and yes-no interrogative. For the yes-no interrogative mood, there are various ways to express it in Chinese, in addition to ending a sentence with the particle “吗,” as shown in Examples 2, 3, and 4. One typical construction is using

the structure “不” or “没” at the end of sentence, which involves placing the positive and negative forms of certain verbs together, allowing the listener to choose between the two forms as a response.

In Example 4, Sean’s question “Do you think that’s a good book?” is an example of a yes-no question. In Version 1, where “吗” is omitted, the question takes on a rhetorical tone, possibly indicating disbelief, surprise, or even challenge. This can give the impression that Sean is questioning the other’s opinion with an edge of sarcasm or doubt. However, in Version 2, the inclusion of “吗” transforms the question into a neutral yes-no inquiry, making the tone more polite and less confrontational. This difference in translation demonstrates how the inclusion or omission of a mood particle can significantly change the interpersonal function and tone of the sentence, which is important in conveying the correct emotional and social context in subtitle translation. Here are some alternatives:

- A) 你觉不觉得那是一本好书?
- B) 你不觉得那是一本好书吗?
- C) 你觉得那是一本好书不?

The three versions above can all convey the interrogative mood as in the original line. However, it is clear that Version B, in comparison with the other two versions, carries a stronger implication that Sean is fond of the book written by Chomsky and is expecting a positive response from Will. In the context, Sean is using *Manufacturing Consent* to compare it with Howard Zinn’s book, which Will had recommended earlier. Therefore, the second expression is an excellent choice for translation, as it aligns with the original line’s implication that Sean holds Chomsky’s book in high regard.

Another way to express the interrogative mood is through tag questions. In translation, there are multiple ways to convey the same meaning when dealing with tag questions.

Example 5:

Will: Maybe you married the wrong woman.

也许你娶错了女人。

Will: That’s it, isn’t it? You married the wrong woman. What happened? What, did she leave you? Was she, you know--banging some other guy?

Version 1: 没错, 你娶错女人了, 发生什么事? 她抛弃你了? 她是不是搞上别的男人?

Version 2: 我说对了, 对吧? 你娶错了女人, 怎么回事? 她甩了你了? 她搞上别的男人了?

In the example mentioned above, Will is making a guess about Sean after seeing his painting. The tag “isn’t it?” is translated as “对吧” in Version 2. Compared to Version 1, which omits the tag question, Version 2 more accurately conveys the interpersonal meaning, as it reflects Will’s excitement and his desire to confirm his assumption. In fact, there are various ways to express the same idea in Chinese, including “我说对了, 是吧?”/“对吧?”/“是吗?”/“对吗?”/“是不?”/“对不对?”/“是不是(呀)?”/“对不对(呀)?” However, it’s important to note that “是

吧”and “对吧” typically expect a more affirmative response than the others. Since film language is often colloquial and tag questions are common, translators can select from these expressions based on the context.

#### 4.1.2. Changing the Mood

Although we mentioned that in film translation the mood of the source language should generally be preserved, due to differences between English and Chinese expressions, there are cases where different moods are used in the translation to better convey the interpersonal meaning of the original text.

Example 6:

Sean: But you presume to know everything about me because you saw a painting of mine.

Version 1: 但你看我的画就认定了解我。

Version 2: 但是你在我的画上瞥了一眼，就自以为了解了我的一切？

In Example 6, the original line in the film is a declarative sentence, and Version 1 preserves the mood without any changes. However, the author believes it would be more effective to translate it as an interrogative. Based on the context, Sean is irritated by Will's judgment and his disrespect towards Sean's wife. The rhetorical nature of the original line highlights Sean's frustration and disbelief at Will's assumption. By translating it as a rhetorical question, as in Version 2, the interpersonal meaning becomes clearer, allowing the audience to better understand Sean's emotional state. The use of the interrogative form also emphasizes the tension in their interaction, making the translation more impactful and truer to the original tone.

#### 4.1.3. Minor Clauses

Halliday [25] argues that “a clause does not exhibit a Mood + Residue structure if it is realizing a minor speech function. Minor speech functions include exclamations, calls, greetings, and alarms.” Vocatives and expletives also do not follow the “Mood + Residue” structure. In film translation, the differences between English and Chinese expressions should not be overlooked.

In English, vocatives are often informal, with people commonly addressing others (family members, superiors, colleagues, teachers, etc.) by their first names. In contrast, Chinese vocatives tend to be more formal, reflecting a different social and linguistic convention.

Example 7:

Professor Lambeau: Well that's all. If you have any questions...I'm sure that Tom has the answers.

Version 1: 就这样，如果有问题，我相信汤姆会解答。

Version 2: 就这样，如果你们有任何问题，我相信汤姆老师一定能解答。

In the example above, “Tom” is translated as “汤姆,” followed by the formal title “老师.” This sentence is taken from the speech of Professor Lambeau, in the same context as Example 1. Tom, while assisting Professor Lambeau, is also referred to as a teacher. In Version 2, the author optimizes the translation to align with Chi-

nese etiquette and formality.

Expletives are often omitted in movie subtitle translation. However, excluding expletives can sometimes diminish the emotional impact of the sentence. In spoken English, expletives are commonly used. Below are some typical examples from *Good Will Hunting*:

Example 8:

Skylar: You're afraid of me. You're afraid that I won't love you back. You know what? I'm afraid too. But fuck it I want to give it a shot. At least I'm honest with you.

Version 1: 你怕我，怕我不爱你。你知道吗？我也怕。但我想试试看，起码我诚实。

Version 2: 你怕我，你怕我不会爱你。你知道吗？我也怕。管他妈的，可我想试试看，至少我对你是诚实的。

Example 9:

Will: ...that this isn't fucking surgery. The motherfucker stabbed me. You don't want to hear that shit, Skylar. Don't tell me you want to hear that shit.

Version 1: 那不是手术，那混蛋刺伤我。你不会想听这种事，别跟我说你想知道。

Version 2: 这他妈的根本不是手术，那王八蛋用刀刺伤了我。你不会想听这堆破事的，别跟我说你想知道。

Both examples above are taken from the heated argument between Will and his girlfriend Skylar. Skylar expresses her desire to go to California for further education and asks Will to join her. However, Will refuses, largely due to his own insecurities, and Skylar's words further damage his already fragile self-esteem.

In Example 8, Version 1 omits the term “fuck it,” which significantly impacts the tone of Skylar's speech. The author argues that this phrase should be retained in the translation because it is essential for conveying Skylar's emotional state—her frustration and anger. The inclusion of the expletive not only emphasizes her boldness and vulnerability but also adds a layer of realism to her character. In spoken English, especially in emotionally charged moments, such expressions are often used to release pent-up frustration, and leaving them out would fail to capture the raw emotion in the scene. The same reasoning applies to Example 9, where Will's anger is again conveyed through expletives. The phrase “fucking surgery” and “motherfucker” in Version 2 intensify Will's frustration, mirroring his deep sense of betrayal and pain. By adding these expletives, the translation does more than just convey the words; it helps communicate the emotional depth of Will's feelings in that moment. The expletives, though harsh, underscore the severity of the situation and how much Will is hurting.

Expletives in both examples serve a critical role in enhancing the interpersonal meaning of the dialogue. They aren't just crude expressions; they are vehicles for emotional expression, revealing the characters' inner turmoil and frustration. In the context of film subtitle translation, omitting such language can risk sanitizing the emotional intensity of the characters, leading to a loss in the authenticity of

their interpersonal exchanges. Therefore, retaining such expressions in the translation ensures that the mood and tone of the original scene are faithfully conveyed to the target audience, allowing them to engage with the characters on a deeper emotional level.

## 4.2. Analysis of Film Subtitle Translation under Modality and Polarity System

Modality can be divided into two categories: modalization (which deals with probability and usuality) and modulation (which concerns obligation and inclination). In English, modality is primarily expressed through finite modal operators, modal adjuncts, and the expansion of predicators. Polarity, on the other hand, is the choice between positive and negative forms. Through polarity, the speaker can express agreement, denial, command, offer, condemnation, suggestion, advice, and more.

### 4.2.1. Modalization

Modalization is a subset of modality that indicates the degree to which a message is certain or probable. In a sentence or dialogue, modalization refers to the extent of practicability (how often something is true) or possibility (how likely it is to be true). The possibility scale includes terms like: possibly, probably, certainly, while the practicability scale includes: sometimes, usually, always.

When translating movie subtitles, some Chinese verbs and adverbs can convey various forms of modalization found in English (such as modal auxiliaries, finite modal operators, or both).

Example 10:

Sean: If I asked you about love you'd probably quote me a sonnet.

Version 1: 问爱情, 你会引述十四行诗。

Version 2: 如果我问你何为爱情, 你大概会引一首十四行诗。

Example 11:

Sean: I ask about war you'd probably throw Shakespeare at me, right ?

Version 1: 问战争, 你会说莎士比亚的话。

Version 2: 问你战争, 你可能会把莎士比亚的话丢来, 对吧?

In the second versions of both examples, the modal adjunct “probably” is directly translated, preserving the original meaning and tone. This choice reflects the uncertainty and possibility conveyed in the English dialogue, which is important for maintaining the interpersonal meaning. In Example 10, “大概” captures Sean’s playful expectation that Will might respond with a sonnet. Without this modal word in Version 1, the translation feels more definitive and loses the intended lighthearted tone. Similarly, in Example 11, “可能” in Version 2 keeps the sense of possibility, maintaining Sean’s humorous anticipation of Will’s reaction. In contrast, Version 1 lacks this nuance, making the statement sound too direct. Overall, the second versions are more faithful to the original, as they convey the intended uncertainty and interpersonal dynamic.

### 4.2.2. Modulation

In English, modulation is expressed through finite modal operators and the expansion of predicators (such as passive verbs and adjectives). In film translation, specific words and structures can be used to convey modulation. Words or expressions that convey obligation include 可以, 应该, 会, 必须, 务必 and 得, while those indicating inclination include 愿, 愿意, 想, 要 and 决意.

Example 12:

Professor Lambeau: If you fail to meet with any of those conditions, you will have to serve time.

Version 1: 如果你不及格, 照样送你回来坐牢。

Version 2: 如果这些条件都达不到, 你还得回来服刑。

In this example, Professor Lambeau is setting conditions for Will in exchange for his release from prison. The modal operator “have to” expresses obligation, signaling that Will must fulfill these conditions, or else he will face consequences. In Version 1, the translation conveys the idea of failure, but it lacks the clear expression of obligation that the original English line communicates. The phrase “照样送你回来坐牢” seems more casual and less precise, which weakens the sense of a serious consequence tied to unmet conditions. In Version 2, however, the translation more accurately reflects the original meaning. The use of “得” captures the same obligation expressed by “have to” in the original, while also emphasizing the consequence of not meeting the conditions. Overall, Version 2 maintains the modality of the original line more faithfully, accurately reflecting the obligation and the gravity of the situation.

Example 13:

Will: All right. I'll do the math but I'm not gonna meet with any fucking therapist.

Version 1: 好, 数学我接受, 但我不去看去他妈的心理医生。

Version 2: 好, 我接受做数学, 但我不要去见什么狗屁心理医生。

In this example, Will expresses his strong resistance to meeting with a therapist after agreeing to do the math. The phrase “not gonna” in English conveys his refusal in a casual but forceful way. In Version 2, “不要” captures Will's strong resistance, emphasizing his subjective inclination. The addition of “什么狗屁心理医生” intensifies his rejection, mirroring the emotional force of the original expletive “fucking.”

From a broader perspective, Version 2 feels more natural and idiomatic in Chinese. The sentence structure flows better in informal speech compared to Version 1, which sounds less fluid. Overall, Version 2 captures Will's frustration and resistance more accurately, reflecting both the emotional tone and the interpersonal dynamics of the original dialogue.

### 4.2.3. Polarity

As mentioned earlier, polarity refers to the choice between positive and negative, or, in other words, an extreme either way. Through polarity, the speaker conveys agreement, denial, command, offer, condemnation, suggestion, advice, and more.

In English-Chinese movie subtitle translation, polarity plays a significant role in shaping the translation.

Example 14:

Sean: You are a tough kid.

Version 1: 你是个很倔的孩子。

Version 2: 你这孩子不好对付。

This example is extracted from a long monologue by Sean, where he invites Will to go to the park with him and speaks frankly. This moment is an important turning point in the movie. The sentence “You are a tough kid” is actually a subjective judgment from Sean, rather than an objective fact. If translated directly into “你是个很倔的孩子”, which is an indicative statement, it makes Sean sound a bit arbitrary or overly blunt in his assessment. To make it more tactful, the author opts for Version 2, using a negative sentence “你这孩子不好对付”. This translation is more euphemistic and softens the tone, making the judgment feel less harsh and more nuanced. From the perspective of the information receiver, such phrasing is more acceptable and less likely to provoke defensiveness, creating a more comfortable interaction between the characters. The negative structure also aligns better with the interpersonal dynamics of their relationship at this point in the movie.

Example 15:

Sean: I doubt you’ve ever dared to love anybody that much.

Version 1: 我怀疑你敢那样爱人。

Version 2: 我觉得你不敢那样爱一个人。

Both Version 1 and Version 2 express the same idea: Sean doubts that Will has ever had the courage to love someone deeply. However, Version 2 changes the structure into a negative sentence, which makes the interpersonal meaning clearer and more impactful. By using the negative form “你不敢那样爱一个人,” it emphasizes Sean’s disbelief in Will’s emotional capacity in a more subtle and reflective way, while still conveying the same judgment. The use of the negative expression in Version 2 aligns better with the interpersonal dynamics of the scene, as it conveys a certain emotional distance and highlights Sean’s concern for Will’s emotional growth. This more nuanced translation adds depth to Sean’s characterization, showing that he’s not just making a casual remark but expressing a deeper, more complex perspective about Will’s inability to connect emotionally.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper has explored the application of interpersonal function theory in the translation of film subtitles, with a specific focus on how mood, modality, and polarity contribute to the interpersonal dynamics of the original text. By analyzing examples from *Good Will Hunting*, it was demonstrated that accurately conveying interpersonal meaning in subtitle translation is crucial for maintaining the emotional tone, relationships, and subtle dynamics between characters.

Through the examination of various translation strategies, including the use of

modal adjuncts and the translation of rhetorical questions, it was shown that decisions in subtitle translation—such as the inclusion of certain expletives or the choice of negative vs. positive structures—play an important role in ensuring that the target audience receives the intended emotional and interpersonal message. The analysis revealed that while direct translations can sometimes convey the basic meaning, adjustments to reflect the tone and nuance of the original dialogue are often necessary.

Fifteen examples from the film were analyzed to illustrate how interpersonal function can be effectively applied to movie subtitle translation. Through this analysis, the following conclusions can be drawn:

Firstly, Equivalence in Translation. A good translation should strive for equivalence with the original lines. However, due to cultural differences and other constraints, achieving perfect equivalence in all aspects is often difficult, if not impossible. Since film dialogue is primarily focused on interpersonal communication, the priority should be to preserve the interpersonal meaning. Secondly, Contextual Equivalence. Achieving equivalence in meaning is, in essence, about achieving equivalence in the context of situation between the source and target languages. A skilled film translator must understand the specific context of the source text in order to replicate that context in the target language, ensuring the lines function similarly in both languages within the same situational context.

To sum up, effective subtitle translation is not merely about word-for-word accuracy; it requires careful attention to the emotional undertones and interpersonal exchanges within the original text. By applying systemic functional linguistics and considering interpersonal function, translators can create subtitles that more accurately reflect the original characters' intentions and emotional journeys, ultimately enhancing the viewer's experience and engagement with the film.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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