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# Translating Linguistic Metaphors in Documentary Subtitles: A Cross-Cultural Reconstruction Perspective

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the challenge of translating Chinese metaphors into English subtitles from a cross-cultural reconstruction perspective. Drawing on Eugene Nida's functional equivalence theory and Peter Newmark's metaphor translation strategies, it analyzes a Chinese documentary and its English subtitles as a case study. Under the constraints of audiovisual translation, the goal is to achieve an equivalent effect on the target audience. The findings indicate that effective subtitle translation of metaphors requires creative adaptation. Culturally shared metaphors can often be translated literally, while culture-specific or conceptually dense metaphors demand adaptation or brief explanation to preserve their meaning and impact. The study illustrates how theoretical principles of dynamic equivalence and metaphor translation are applied in practice, ensuring that translated subtitles remain faithful in spirit to the original yet accessible to international viewers despite spatio-temporal constraints.

**Keywords:** linguistic metaphors; audiovisual translation; functional equivalence; translation strategies

## 1. Introduction

Translation plays a crucial role in bridging linguistic and cultural gaps within our increasingly globalized society[1]. It extends far beyond a simple word-for-word substitution, but proves a complex act of conveying meaning across cultures[2]. This challenge is especially evident with the translation of linguistic metaphors, which are deeply rooted in cultural backgrounds and rarely have perfect one-to-one equivalents in other languages[3,4]. For example, the Chinese idiom " 井底之蛙 " (literally "a frog at the bottom of a well") expresses the idea of having a limited perspective. A direct English translation would likely fail to resonate, so a culturally appropriate equivalent must be found. For instance, phrases like "living in a bubble" can convey a similar idea to English audiences. Such examples show why a cross-cultural perspective is essential in the translation of linguistic metaphors, meaning that translators should grasp not only the literal meanings but also the underlying conceptual metaphors, then anticipate how these will be understood by the target audience.

This paper examines the English translation of the linguistic metaphors in the subtitles of a Chinese documentary to see how the metaphors are conveyed across cultures under the unique constraints of audiovisual translation. Unlike literary translation, where a translator could add context in narration or endnotes, subtitles must condense meaning into a few brief lines that viewers read on-screen. These constraints make subtitle translation especially challenging, as the translator must communicate culturally specific content within tight spatial and temporal limits[5]. The central question addressed in this

paper, therefore, is how to achieve equivalent meaning and impact when translating linguistic metaphors from Chinese to English, given profound cultural differences and the brevity of subtitles.

We approach this problem from a cultural reconstruction perspective, viewing translation as a process of deconstructing the source text's meaning and rebuilding it in the target language in a natural and audience-friendly form. First, we review relevant theories, especially Eugene Nida's dynamic (functional) equivalence and Newmark's taxonomy of metaphor translation procedures, to establish a framework. We then analyze selected examples from the documentary's Chinese-to-English subtitles as a case study, illustrating these concepts in practice. Finally, we draw conclusions on the importance of a cross-cultural reconstructive approach in subtitle translation and the lessons learned from the analysis.

## 2.  Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Translation as Cross-Cultural Reconstruction

Translation scholars have long emphasized that translation is an act of cross-cultural communication, rather than a mechanical transfer of words[1,2]. Among them, Nida proposed that a good translation reproduces the meaning of the original in a form that feels natural to the target audience[2]. Central to his theory is the notion of seeking the "closest natural equivalent", which prioritizes the transmission of meaning and spirit over strict adherence to form. This distinction underlies his concept of dynamic or functional equivalence, which focuses on provoking a similar response in the target audience as in the source audience. In contrast, formal equivalence emphasizes fidelity to the original wording and structure. In practice, achieving dynamic equivalence often requires adapting expressions to the target culture's language norms so that the translation reads naturally and produces the same impact as the original.

In audiovisual translation, these cross-cultural reconstruction challenges are further complicated by technical constraints. Subtitle translators have limited space and time to convey information, or in other words, maximum reading speeds and character limits mean there is no room for lengthy explanations or footnotes[5]. This means the translator should adopt creative solutions by deciding which elements of the original dialogue to prioritize and how to render them in a concise way that still makes sense culturally. Overall, adopting a cross-cultural reconstruction perspective means recognizing that differences between languages run deeper than words, and they include distinct cultural images and values. The translator's role is to mediate between these cultures so that the target text conveys the same meaning, tone, and effect as the original, even if the wording changes significantly.

### 2.2. Strategies for Translating Metaphors

Linguistic metaphors serve as a useful test case for cross-cultural translation because they often reflect culture-specific image. A metaphor expresses one thing in terms of another, and a direct literal translation can fall flat if the image does not carry the same meaning in the target culture. Many scholars have proposed approaches for translating metaphors. Notably, Newmark categorized metaphors by type (e.g., dead, cliché, stock, adapted, recent/slang, and original metaphors) and outlined a range of translation procedures[6].

- Preserving the original image: This approach retains the source language (SL) metaphor in its original form, if it is understandable and culturally appropriate in the TL. It is most effective when the image carries similar resonance across both cultures.
- Replacing with a TL conventional metaphor: the metaphor is replaced with an equivalent metaphor that is familiar and idiomatic in the TL. The aim is to preserve the rhetorical function rather than the literal image.
- Literal translation of the metaphor: The metaphor is translated word-for-word, maintaining its figurative form. This strategy works when the metaphor is either transparent or has been adopted into global usage.
- Converting the metaphor to a simile: The translator can make an implicit metaphor explicit by rephrasing it as a simile or by adding a short clarifying cue. This approach retains the figurative idea but makes it more accessible to the target audience.

- Paraphrasing the metaphor's sense: If the metaphorical image would not be understood by the target audience, or if brevity is crucial, the translator may omit the original image and convey just the essential meaning in plain language. This approach sacrifices some stylistic flavor but ensures clarity.
- Omitting the metaphor: If a metaphor is too culture-bound or not important to the message, the translator might leave it out. This approach is used only when preserving the metaphor would confuse the audience or waste precious subtitle space for little gain.
- Retaining the metaphor with added explanation: In cases where the metaphor is culturally significant or stylistically important but may not be immediately understood by TL readers, the metaphor may be preserved and accompanied by footnotes or glosses.

The choice among these strategies depends on the specific metaphor's importance, the availability of an equivalent image, and the context and genre of the text. A key consideration is whether the metaphorical image and its connotation are shared between the source and target cultures. If they are, carrying over the original image can enrich the translation by preserving the source text's flavor without causing misunderstanding. However, if the image has no resonance or carries a different connotation in the target culture, a more domesticating approach, namely replacing it with a culturally familiar image or translating its meaning, may be necessary to achieve functional equivalence for the audience.

Genre also plays a role. In literary or poetic works, translators often prefer preserving original metaphors to maintain the aesthetic and cultural richness of the text. In contrast, for pragmatic or fast-paced content such as news commentary or instructional videos, translators may simplify or neutralize metaphors to maintain clarity and flow for viewers.

Ultimately, translators must evaluate metaphors case by case, guided by not only theory but also by pragmatism. As Newmark and Nida both emphasized, the final goal is to convey the intended meaning and effect to the target audience—even if that means changing or even omitting a metaphor when a literal translation would fail to communicate the point[2,6]. Indeed, recent scholars argue that translators should avoid relying on any rigid set of procedures for linguistic metaphors, instead they should treat each metaphor on its own terms with due cultural sensitivity[4].

## 3. Case Study: Translating Linguistic Metaphors in Documentary Subtitles

To explore these theoretical ideas in practice, we analyzed a Chinese documentary, 行进天津 (Xíngjìn Tiānjīn, or *The Tales of Tianjin*) and its English subtitles, focusing on how various metaphors were translated[7]. According to the Publicity Department of Tianjin Municipal Committee, the documentary introduced Tianjin's historical legacy, cultural vitality, and urban development. The author of this paper also participated in the translation of the documentary's subtitles, providing firsthand insight into the translation choices involved. Rather than exhaustively cataloguing every metaphor in the film, we highlight a few illustrative examples that represent different translation approaches. These examples demonstrate how the translator balanced literal translation and adaptation to achieve cross-cultural equivalence under subtitle constraints.

First, many conventional metaphors (common idioms or "dead" metaphors with clear equivalents) were translated directly into English with little change. For instance, a line describing industry as the nation's foundation and strength used the Chinese phrases "立国之本" and "强国之基," which literally evoke a "foundation" and a "cornerstone." The translator converted these to natural English expressions: "the foundation of a nation" and "the cornerstone of its strength." Such metaphors have standard counterparts in English, so translating them literally caused no loss of meaning. Likewise, a clichéd personification like "城市是有生命的" (literally "a city is alive") was subtitled as "Tianjin is a vibrant city," preserving the idea of liveliness but using a more idiomatic English expression. In both cases, the metaphorical image was familiar enough to carry over, and the result reads smoothly. This outcome aligns with Newmark's recommendation that conventional metaphors can often be translated with an equivalent metaphor in the target language[6]. It also reflects Nida's principle of functional equivalence, ensuring that an English audience will perceive "foundation" and "vibrant" in much the same way the Chinese audience understands the original phrases[2].

In contrast, when a metaphor had no ready equivalent or sounded awkward in a direct translation, the translator adapted it to a different image. One example described a major development as giving Tianjin "wings to fly" in the

Chinese narration ("为天津插上腾飞之翼"). Translating this literally would be unnatural in English, so the subtitle reads "speeds up Tianjin's economic take-off." Here the translator preserved the underlying concept of flight and rapid ascent but expressed it through a metaphor more natural to English, namely "take-off" (evoking an airplane). This change maintains the intended meaning, Tianjin's development is soaring, while avoiding an alien image. As Newmark suggests, a source metaphor can be replaced by an equivalent metaphor in the target language that produces a similar effect[6]. The translator's solution demonstrates creative reconstruction. By giving up the literal *wings*, the subtitle gains clarity while still expressing the metaphorical idea of sudden progress. In terms of Nida's dynamic equivalence, the effect on the audience is also preserved. English viewers understand that Tianjin's economy is being propelled upward, just as Chinese viewers understood the original image.

Similarly, for a recent internet-slang metaphor, the translator prioritized clarity over strict fidelity to the original image. The Chinese phrase "圈粉无数" (literally "to draw countless fans into one's circle") was used to describe a location's popularity. A word-for-word translation of this phrase would likely confuse viewers, so the subtitle became "a photogenic spot for countless fans." This conversion conveys the basic idea that the place attracts many admirers without preserving the quirky source metaphor of "circling fans." In doing so, the translator sacrificed the colorful slang flavor but ensured immediate comprehension. Such a choice reflects Nida's audience-oriented approach which requires the subtitle to communicate the message in simple terms that English viewers can quickly grasp.

It is worth noting that a more figurative translation (for example, "a magnet for countless fans") could have retained more of the metaphorical flavor. However, the translator opted for concision and neutrality, which was appropriate given the documentary's formal tone. This example shows how subtitle translators often prioritize clarity over stylistic nuance, especially when dealing with culture-specific or novel metaphors that have no easy equivalent in the target language.

Finally, when faced with a truly creative, "original" metaphor, the translator endeavored to preserve its poetic image. At one point, the Chinese narration describes the city lights of Tianjin as "华光烁烁，溢彩如星河," comparing the shimmering lights to a galaxy of stars. The English subtitle rendered this line as "shimmering with radiant hues akin to a galaxy." Crucially, the translator carried over the striking visual metaphor almost intact: the city's lights are likened to a splendid galaxy. By translating the metaphor literally, the subtitle retains the aesthetic impact of the original line. This decision reflects Newmark's advice that unique, creative metaphors should be translated closely whenever possible to preserve the author's vision[6]. The result is an evocative line that likely inspires the same awe in English viewers as the Chinese version does for its audience.

However, not every metaphor in the documentary received such figurative treatment. Earlier in the film, a grandiose image about "the era has written magnificent lines of poetry here" ("时代在这里写下壮丽诗行") was translated more plainly as "witnessing its glorious achievement in the new era," dropping the poetic metaphor of "writing a poem". The translator likely decided that the metaphor was too flowery for the international audience in that context, so it was reduced to sense. This contrast illustrates the case-by-case judgment is required in subtitling. In the "galaxy" instance, the metaphor was both comprehensible and central to the tone, so it was kept; in the "poetry" example, it was deemed too elaborate, so it was omitted. Knowing when to domesticate and when to foreignize is an essential skill for translators.

## 4. Conclusion

The case study above demonstrates how translation theories can be applied in actual subtitle practice. Overall, the translator's choices aligned well with Newmark's framework of metaphor translation and Nida's concept of functional equivalence. Conventional metaphors were translated with equivalent English metaphors, ensuring easy comprehension. More culture-bound metaphors were adapted to maintain clarity and effect. When a metaphor was central to the expressive tone, the translator preserved it, showing loyalty to the source text's spirit while still phrasing it in natural English. In other cases, metaphors were toned down or omitted to avoid confusing the audience, consistent with the need for brevity and clarity in subtitles.

Crucially, each decision was guided by the aim of cross-cultural equivalence of effect, namely the English subtitles seek to evoke the same response in target viewers that the Chinese subtitles do for its original audience. Eugene Nida's principle that the translator's true loyalty is to conveying meaning and provoking the intended audience response, rather than to the source text's exact wording, justifies such adaptive choices[2]. Likewise, Newmark's taxonomy provided a useful toolbox of strategies, but the translator still had to choose among them based on context and audience expectations. In summary, translating linguistic metaphors across languages and cultures, especially in the constrained format of subtitles, requires both linguistic creativity and cultural insight. By reconstructing metaphors for the target culture while respecting the original message, the subtitled documentary was able to bridge Chinese and English audiences with minimal loss of meaning or artistry.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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