



# A Study of Dialect Films Subtitle Translation Strategies Guided by the Theory of Functional Equivalence — Taking the Dialect Film "A Cool Fish" as an Example

**Bing Xiong**

Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong 999077, China

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**Abstract:** Subtitle translation is a field of translation where the subtitles of films or TV series are translated simultaneously. With the development of China's film and television industry and the inflow of outstanding foreign films and TV dramas, subtitle translation for film and television is flourishing. Due to the constraints of space and time, film and television subtitles are generally characterised by the following features: synchronicity, brevity and clarity, accessibility, colloquialism and a high degree of aesthetics. In recent years, the Chinese film and television industry has gradually begun to tell the stories of marginal characters, who are mostly told in dialect. In the vast expanse of China, according to incomplete statistics, there are about seventy dialects, which are officially divided into ten broad categories. Replacing Mandarin with dialects in film and television dramas not only reflects the regional characteristics and makes the audience feel more immersed, but dialect films are also highly aesthetic works of art with a cultural load. In this paper, we will analyse the dialect subtitle translation in the famous 2018 dialect film A COOL FISH from the perspective of the theory of functional equivalence, providing a detailed analysis of which for dialect words, sentences and rhetoric.

**Keywords:** dialect translation, subtitle translation, functional equivalence, translation strategies

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## 1. Introduction

Professor Qian (2000) says: "The impact of film and television translation on society is by no means inferior to that of literary translation either, but the translation community has paid far less attention to film and television translation than to literary translation." The study of strategies for subtitle translation is seen to be very important. And with the development and improvement of China's film and television industry, the rise of dialect films has brought new challenges to subtitle translation. As an important transmission tool for China's intangible cultural heritage, many art forms, such as: opera and mountain songs, need to be transmitted through dialects. Therefore, as a cultural load, dialects often need to be translated with different translation strategies in mind, taking into account the cultural influence on the source and target languages.

As Chinese dialect films and TV dramas are currently on the rise and most of them are mostly in Mandarin, there is less research on subtitling for dialect films and TV dramas. Most scholars tend to analyse dialect translations in literary works, for example, many writers of vernacular literature use a lot of slang or dialect in their writing, such as Red Sorghum. This paper analyses the translation of 'cool fish', a typical Southwestern dialect film, in an attempt to address the difficulties of translating dialect subtitles and to analyse the cultural connotations contained therein, in order to allow foreign audiences to 'truly' understand Chinese regional films and their regional characteristics. It is also hoped that this thesis will provide a more comprehensive analysis of dialect subtitle translation through the theory of functional equivalence, in order to improve the influence of functional equivalence of thought in terms of dialect subtitle translation, and to help future generations of translators and critics to better translate and study dialect subtitles. It is also hoped that this paper will make a small contribution to the globalization of Chinese cinema.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Dialect translation

As the Chinese idiom goes, "Different customs and dialects vary from mile to mile", and with China's vast territory and large population, different regions have different customs and pronunciations. In Huang's (2003) book *Modern Chinese*, the dialects of China are divided into seven major dialect regions: the official dialect (also known as the northern dialect), the Wu dialect, the Xiang dialect, the Gan dialect, the Hakka dialect, the Cantonese dialect, and the Min dialect. The languages of each dialect area have significant differences in phonology, grammar and script composition.

As most domestic Chinese dialects present themselves as phonetically distinct, they have also been analysed by scholars both at home and abroad from a phonological perspective. In one of Zhai's (2015) articles, she analyses 260 papers from 1957 to 2013 in China that examine the importance of Chinese dialects on the acquisition of English phonology. From a literary perspective, there are more studies analysing English translations of dialects in literary works. This is because the history of modern Chinese literature has seen more great writers depicting the countryside and valuing dialect culture. In her MA thesis, Zhao (2019) talks about the principles of dialect translation (Faithfulness, Target Reader Orientation, Preference for Standard Language and translation strategies (direct translation, paraphrasing) in the book *The Ruined City* as an example.

## 2.2 Subtitle translation

Subtitling is a popular form of audio-visual translation where the spoken content of a video is translated into text, usually at the bottom of the screen, at the same time as the audio. O'Hagan (2003), Armstrong et al. (2006), Flanagan & Kenny (2007) and Volk (2008) are among the scholars who have discussed the application of machine translation in subtitle translation. Domestic scholars currently prefer to analyse subtitle translation on a cultural level, in addition to exploring it from a technical perspective. For example, in GUO's (2019) article on translation strategies for culturally loaded words in *The Legend of Zhen Huan* from a teleological perspective, there is talk of some translation strategies to be used for cultural idioms in the course of China's historical evolution. Similarly Wang (2017) in her paper talks about strategies regarding cultural translation involving subtitles in translation, using the *Monkey King* movie as an example.

The strategy of subtitling affects the audience's perception of the subtitles to a certain extent. In Ghia, E. (2012) paper, he claimed that Technologies for eye tracking can be helpful in the investigation of patterns of perception and focus while watching products with subtitle. And also through his experiment, the findings indicate that nonliteral translation results in an increase in the overall number of deflections to the subtitles.

## 3. Translation strategies

*A Cool Fish* is a film made in the dialect of southwest China, with the whole film telling the stories of minor characters in the Guizhou dialect. Many regional epithets and sentences appear. Therefore, the following will analyse the three translation strategies in this film.

### 3.1 Literal translation

There are many dialect words and sentences in this film that are directly translated. The statistics in chen's (2018) study of English translations of dialectal vernaculars show that most of the studies of dialectal vernaculars use direct translations, which not only express the emotional colour of the original text, but also convey the style and message of the original text.

The most obvious translation in this film is the direct translation of the appellation. Shao (2020) mentions in his text that different translations are used depending on the nomenclature of the dialects, with most of them being direct translations and a few using pinyin directly.

In this film, more dialect titles appear, such as: “老子(I,me)”、“瓜娃子(idiot)”、“憨批(idiot)”、“鸡冠(chicken-head)”、“卷毛毛(curly hair)”etc. The following is an analysis of the above mentioned epithets one by one.

Example 1:

Chinese: “老子”

English: “I, me”

"老子" is often used in the southwestern dialect to refer to oneself. It is usually used when the speaker is of a higher status and wants to show his or her identity. Compared to "我" in Mandarin, it has a heavier connotation of being above people and is often disrespectful. However, due to the timeliness of the subtitles, translators often deal with "老子" by translating it directly as "I, me"

Example 2:

Chinese: “瓜娃子”、“憨批”

English: “idiot”

Both "瓜娃子" and "憨批" mean stupid people in dialect, although to a greater extent "憨批" is a bit heavier. They can also be directly translated as “moron”, “fool”, or “stupid fellow”.

Example 3:

Chinese: “鸡冠” “卷毛毛”

English: “chicken-head” ,“curly hair”

In the film, Cockney and Curly Hair are the terms used by the heroine to refer to the two humongous bandits, both of which are of course based on the specific characteristics of the two men. One of them has a haircut that resembles a chicken's

head, while the other has curly hair.

### 3.2 Meaning translation

Although most of the above-mentioned terms are directly translated, there are also a number of paraphrased appellation in this film.

For example, the main character, Hu Guangsheng, is also called "眼镜" in addition to "鸡冠 (chicken-head)". The direct translation of "眼镜" is "glasses", but in this film it is translated as "bra". It is also mentioned later in the film that Hu Guangsheng killed a cobra when he was a boy, so people called him "cobra" and then "bra". It must be said that the translator's use of "bra" as a nickname is very good, making good use of the functional equivalence theory of meaning and form, and the fact that "bra" as a nickname has the same contempt meaning as "眼镜 (glasses)" in different languages. It also help to set the tone for the film's main theme.

Paraphrasing refers to being faithful to the content of the original text without adhering to its structure (Meng 2009). The translation of many dialect sentences in the film also uses the translation strategy of Italian translation.

Example 4:

Chinese: “一大早吃火药了蛮？”

English: “Why are you so mad?”

In this sentence, "吃火药" originally meant "eating gunpowder", a metaphor often used in southwest China to describe a person whose temper explodes like gunpowder. If we translate it as "Did you eat the gunpowder in this morning?", it is obvious that foreign viewers may not be able to understand the meaning of this sentence, so translating it as “Why are you so mad?” may help viewers to understand, and because of the transient nature of the subtitles. The meaning translation is very appropriate.

Example 5:

Chinese: “那黑巴巴的天好大哦。”

English: “The sky so dark, with mass mist surrounding.”

The original text here is a dialect song sung in the vernacular, which is generally more formal and has no clear subject-predicate object, and is often rhetorical. In the Ge Haowen translation of *The Fatigue of Life and Death*, the author generally adopts a straightforward approach to the translation of vernacular songs to ensure their original flavour (Shi 2020). However, after all, the form of subtitle translation and literary translation differ greatly, and in order to facilitate the audience to understand the meaning of the folksongs at the first time, the translator will adopt the strategy of paraphrasing. The words "黑巴巴的天" is translated as "mass mist". The “黑巴巴” is a little darker than normal dark, so the translator adds the adverb 'so' to deal with this.

### 3.3 Omission translation

When there is no equivalent word in the target culture, omission frequently takes place. According to Ivacovoni (2009), the term "omission" describes the removal of one or more words from SLT during translation.

Many translations of dialects are abridged, mainly because the unique expression of the source language and the cultural imagery it contains cannot be found in a suitable target language, which to some extent also illustrates the untranslatability of translation, as well as the regret of translation (Chen 2018). The text must at the same time convey information, such as how the deletion of an entire phrase violates the target language's grammatical rules, usage patterns, and modes of expression.

Example 6:

Chinese: “你松你妈卖麻花阿?你松!” “我爱你妈卖麻花情。”

English: “What the fuck are you doing?” “Fuck your love.”

In Mandarin Chinese, the word “麻花” only has to mean a rope in the shape of a twist or an edible twist food, and is often used as an expletive in southwestern dialects to intersperse sentences to express anger. Of course there is also a common Chinese swear word in these two sentences: 你妈 (cursing at mother). There are in fact many swear words in English, and here the translator has chosen the most common one, "fuck", to replace "你妈", omitting the translation of "麻花 (twist)".

In addition to this, words for objects are often used in the southwestern dialect as swear words, such as "锤子 (hammer)", "铲子 (shovel)", "坨子 (lump)", etc. When translating such words, especially in subtitle translations, the translator may choose to omit the translation to simplify it and make it easier for the audience to understand.

## 4. Conclusion

This study aims at exploring the important and difficult points of translating film subtitles into dialects, and analysing the translation strategies through subtitles for dialect films. The structure of the study shows that when translating dialect

subtitles, it is necessary to take into account the translatability of the dialect on the one hand and the characteristics of the subtitles on the other. Therefore, in this study, it is found that when translating some nicknames in the dialect, translators tend to adopt a direct translation approach and some use a translation strategy. In the case of rhetorical phrases in the dialect, the translator will use a paraphrase to help the viewer understand the phrase and to meet the principle of timeliness of the subtitle translation. When translating words in dialects specific to Chinese, the translator will often omit one or more words to avoid lengthy subtitles and incomprehension by the audience.

Overall, this article analyses some strategies for subtitle translation from the theory of functional equivalence in order to provide translation ideas for subsequent translators. However, there are still some shortcomings in this paper, such as the lack of discussion on the translation strategies of dialects and the lack of discussion on the translation strategies of reconstruction, but this investigation is reserved for later study.

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