

A Study on Subtitling Translation from a Multimodal Pragmatic Perspective: A Case Study of the English Subtitles of *Return to Dust*

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Abstract

Return to Dust is an outstanding mainland Chinese film that was nominated for the Golden Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival. This paper, using the theories of conversational implicature and the relevance principle, explores the implicit meanings in the film's subtitles from a multimodal perspective. It also examines whether the subtitling translation of the film is reasonable and appropriate. The paper argues that the subtitling translation should pay more attention to the cultural context of the dialogues and the pragmatic ambiguities within the film. By doing so, it can better convey the plot and adopt more suitable translation techniques and methods.

Keywords

Multimodal; Subtitling Translation; Return to Dust; Conversational Implicature; Relevance Principle.

1. Introduction

With the advancement of technology and the improvement in people's quality of life, the demand for movie-watching has significantly increased. As an important form of mental entertainment, film has evolved from black-and-white silent movies to black-and-white sound films, and eventually to color sound films, reflecting changes in both sound and color. The development of globalization has enriched the diversity of films and promoted their cross-regional dissemination. The flourishing of films in different languages has further spurred the need for film translation, leading to the rise of dubbed films and subtitling translation. Dubbing involves re-recording the film's audio in the target language, while subtitling adds translated text to the original film. Today, subtitling has gradually become the mainstream trend.

Return to Dust is a highly acclaimed Chinese film from 2022 that was nominated for the Golden Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival. As a film that has gained recognition both domestically and internationally, its visual effects, sound design, and acting performances are all outstanding. Given that subtitling plays a crucial role in promoting Chinese films internationally, the subtitling translation of *Return to Dust* merits further research and discussion.

2. Introduction to *Return to Dust*

Return to Dust portrays the lives of a newlywed couple from a rural village in northern China, highlighting the honest and simple spirit of the rural people and the deep attachment of northwestern farmers to their land. The main characters are both very straightforward rural individuals, but they are also marginalized figures within their community—outsiders of their time. The male protagonist is an older, unmarried man living in poverty, while the female protagonist suffers from a physical ailment. After a simple marriage registration, the couple begins their life together. The film contrasts their primitive agricultural lifestyle with the

gradually modernizing environment around them, showcasing the disconnect between the protagonists and the era they live in. Just as they are about to achieve traditional happiness, the female protagonist dies unexpectedly, imbuing the film with a sense of tragedy.

The film has several notable characteristics: First, it was entirely shot in rural Gansu, and the actors all spoke in the local dialect. The male lead was portrayed by a non-professional actor, which adds to the film's authenticity. Second, the film has minimal dialogue, a slow pace, and primarily focuses on the interaction between people and the land. Third, the film's music is particularly distinctive. In an interview, director Li Ruijun mentioned that while strong music is typically used to intensify emotions as the characters' feelings peak, in *Return to Dust*, the music only begins after the characters' emotions have calmed, thereby extending the emotional space of the narrative [1: 59].

Since its release, the film has received widespread acclaim both domestically and internationally. As of June 2023, it holds a score of 8.4 out of 10 on Douban (a major Chinese online community with a reputable film review platform), making it the highest-rated Chinese-language film of 2022 on the platform. Internationally, the film has garnered a score of 7.7 out of 10 on IMDb and a 94% freshness rating on Rotten Tomatoes. Although *Return to Dust* was not widely released abroad and was only screened at the Berlin International Film Festival, the ratings are primarily from industry professionals, reflecting its artistic value indirectly through these high scores.

3. Multimodality and Pragmatics

Multimodality refers to the channels and media used in communication, including systems of symbols such as language, technology, images, colors, and music. When discourse utilizes only one mode, it is termed "monomodal discourse," such as listening to a news broadcast through the auditory modality or reading a novel through the visual modality. Discourse that employs two or more modes is referred to as "multimodal discourse," and some also refer to discourse that uses exactly two modes as "bimodal discourse" [2: 83]. Thus, multimodal discourse refers to the phenomenon of communication through multiple senses—such as auditory, visual, and tactile—using various means and symbolic resources, including language, images, sounds, and actions [3: 24].

Films are not unidirectional forms of interaction; they involve multiple forms of interaction, including auditory and visual elements. Visual interaction, in turn, encompasses actors' body movements, expressions, positioning, and scene layout, among other factors. Therefore, films are inherently multimodal, and subtitle translation is a product of multimodal translation. Zhang Delu [3: 25] proposed a theoretical framework for multimodal discourse analysis, adapted from systemic functional linguistics, which consists of five levels: the cultural level, the contextual level, the meaning level, the form level, and the media level.

In their work "The Application of Multimodal Analysis in Pragmatic Studies," Chen Xinren and Qian Yonghong argue that multimodal discourse analysis can be combined with pragmatics to develop a multimodal analytical framework suitable for pragmatic interpretation, thereby facilitating a better understanding of human language use and comprehension. The multimodal dimensions of pragmatic analysis can be divided into three levels: situational factors, communicator factors, and media factors. These levels should be considered within the context of relevant pragmatic theories to achieve a more nuanced understanding [4: 91].

As an independent discipline, pragmatics has developed various theories, including Grice's Cooperative Principle, the Politeness Principle, Relevance Theory, Adaptation Theory, and Memetics, among others. The Cooperative Principle and Politeness Principle are generally regarded as principles of conversational interaction that people typically adhere to. When these principles are violated, it often indicates that the speaker intends to convey a different meaning.

In such cases, context and relevance theory are needed to identify and interpret the most appropriate meaning. Context is central to pragmatics; Mo Aiping [5: 7] argues that the expression of meaning is often constrained by context. Successful subtitle translation relies on multiple contextual factors, including not only the context within the film but also the audience's social and cultural background. Cultural and situational contexts must be considered [6: 37].

The dialogues between film characters are crucial as they most directly reflect character traits and advance the plot. Therefore, understanding character dialogue is essential. By combining pragmatics with multimodality, multimodal pragmatic analysis allows for a deeper understanding of the plot, enabling subtitle translation to more accurately and appropriately convey the intended message.

4. Research on Subtitling Translation from a Multimodal Pragmatic Perspective

Multimodal pragmatic analysis can help us better understand the true content conveyed through various modes in a film, including sound, actors' body language, and dialogue, as well as the meanings the film aims to express. In this section, we will primarily analyze the dialogue of the film's characters, considering multimodal elements within the film. Using the principles of conversational implicature and relevance theory from pragmatics, we will analyze the characters' dialogues to restore the optimal narrative effect the director intended to present and assess whether the subtitling translation achieves the intended pragmatic meaning.

4.1. Conversational Implicature and Relevance Theory

Grice first introduced the Cooperative Principle of verbal communication in his 1967 lectures at Harvard University. He argued that people cooperate in verbal communication, driven by a common desire for mutual understanding in conversation. Therefore, they generally adhere to certain cooperative principles. The Cooperative Principle includes the following four maxims [7: 45-46]:

1. Quantity Maxim: The contribution should be as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange, and it should not be more informative than required.
2. Quality Maxim: Do not say what you believe to be false, and do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
3. Relation Maxim: Be relevant; avoid saying things that are unrelated to the current conversation.
4. Manner Maxim: Avoid obscurity and ambiguity, be brief, and be orderly.

Grice considered adhering to these cooperative principles and their maxims as rational behavior. Anyone aiming to achieve the goals of a conversation would naturally be inclined to follow these principles and maxims. However, Grice also pointed out that people do not always strictly follow these principles in communication. Sometimes, speakers may intentionally violate the Cooperative Principle, either due to politeness or contextual needs. In such cases, the listener must look beyond the surface meaning of the speaker's words to grasp the deeper meaning, known as conversational implicature. Although Grice himself acknowledged some limitations in these principles, such as the overlap between the Quantity Maxim and the Relation Maxim (Grice 1975: 46), and noted that these principles might not be applicable in all situations, such as during arguments or letter writing, the Cooperative Principle does describe general patterns in everyday conversation.

Relevance Theory, proposed by Sperber and Wilson in their book *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, introduces two key concepts: cognitive relevance and communicative relevance, collectively referred to as Relevance Theory. This theory brought new perspectives to the field

of pragmatics. The process of understanding discourse involves establishing relevance and seeking optimal relevance through inference. Maximal relevance refers to the listener's ability to achieve the greatest contextual effects with the least cognitive effort, while optimal relevance refers to the discourse participant's ability to achieve sufficient contextual effects with effective effort. Optimal relevance is the expected outcome in verbal communication. In verbal communication, listeners are not searching for maximal relevance but rather optimal relevance [7: 174]. People pursue "maximal relevance" in the cognitive domain, while they pursue "optimal relevance" in the communicative domain. The main difference between "maximal" and "optimal" relevance lies in their approach to handling issues from different perspectives [5: 156].

4.2. Static Elements

The static elements of a film, including the poster and still shots, are integral components that also hold analytical value.

(1)

- ST (Source Text): 隱入尘烟

- TT (Target Text): Return to Dust

film poster serves as a special discourse expression between the director, as the communicator, and the audience. On the movie poster, the four Chinese characters "隱入尘烟" appear to be floating on clouds, ethereal and seemingly about to drift away with the wind. Above these characters is the English title "Return to Dust."

From the perspective of situational factors, the poster is dominated by warm colors such as red, yellow, and orange, interspersed with a grainy texture reminiscent of sand, giving the impression of a warm-toned textured painting. The top of the poster is filled with a blue sky and a white cloud, followed by a red, yellow, and orange desert below. The protagonists, rendered in black and white, are seated on a pile of red and yellow sand.

From the communicator's perspective, the male and female protagonists are depicted leaning against each other, their faces showing wrinkles, as they gaze into the distance.

From the perspective of media factors, when viewers see this poster, they first experience the impact of the colors. The high saturation of reds, oranges, and yellows contrasts sharply with the black-and-white images of the protagonists, creating a stark and desolate atmosphere. The raised texture of the grains on the poster, combined with the ethereal quality of the Chinese title "隱入尘烟," evokes the imagery of "dust and smoke."

The Chinese title is poetic and artistic, suggesting a disappearance into dust and light smoke. In contrast, the English translation "Return to Dust" is straightforward. The term "dust" refers to particles of dirt or sand carried by the wind. Considering the position of the characters on the poster, it seems as if the dust stirred up by the wind is gradually covering them, symbolizing their return to the earth.

According to relevance theory, as viewers appreciate the poster, they can simultaneously grasp the thematic tone of the film based on the color scheme, font arrangement, and the positioning of the characters. While the translation is simple, it, in conjunction with the poster, allows the audience to understand the deeper meaning embedded in the film's title.

4.3. Dynamic Elements

The dynamic elements of the film are composed of multiple modalities, including sound, actor movements, and settings. Since "Return to Dust" features dialogue in a regional dialect, it incorporates a variety of specific cultural contexts. The linguistic, situational, and cultural factors of both the source and target languages must be understood and reconstructed by the translator to influence the translation process effectively (Mo Aiping, 2010: 8). Therefore, it is

essential to first develop a correct understanding of the cultural context to identify appropriate interpretations and translations. Additionally, due to the pragmatic ambiguity arising from the different actions and purposes of the communicating parties, He Ziran posits that pragmatic ambiguity refers to the uncertainty in language use and understanding, which can be intentional or accidental, and it requires reasoning to find the best relevance.

4.3.1. Cultural Context

(2)

- ST (Source Text): 打死这个不值钱的遭瘟货。

- TT (Target Text): I should beat it to death for causing so much trouble.

"遭瘟货" is a dialect phrase from Gansu, a province in northern China, and it reflects a specific cultural context that foreign audiences may find difficult to understand. Zhang Delu (2009: 28) notes that the cultural dimension of multimodal discourse analysis is reflected in the cultural context, which includes "the ideology composed of people's thought patterns, philosophy of life, habits, and all social norms, as well as the communicative procedures or structural potentials that can realize this ideology, known as genres." The term "遭瘟" can mean "getting sick" or "causing trouble."

The audience may interpret "遭瘟货" in two ways:

1. "The donkey is sick."
2. "The donkey is troublesome and causes problems."

This line is spoken by Ma Youtong, Ma Youtie's brother, shortly after the opening scene. From the situational context perspective, this occurs when several people are gathered at Ma Youtong's house, discussing marriage over a meal. Ma Youtie's donkey follows him into the courtyard, and in this situation, Ma Youtong puts down his bowl and chopsticks, saying this line as he walks out.

From the communicator's perspective, Ma Youtong's large strides and raised voice convey a tone of annoyance. Given this analysis, the most relevant meaning of "遭瘟" in this context is "causing trouble," making it appropriate to choose a translation that corresponds to this interpretation.

The translation "causing so much trouble" effectively captures the essence of the original phrase and aligns with the context of the plot, making it easier for foreign audiences to understand.

(3)

- ST (Source Text): 谁让我今天没开张呢!

- TT (Target Text): Only because you are my first customer today.

This scene occurs when Ma Youtie goes to the city to help his nephew transport furniture. The phrase "开张" in Chinese has multiple meanings, including: "1. A newly established shop begins its operations; 2. The beginning of something; 3. The first sale of the day in a shop; 4. To open up, not be closed off; 5. Grand and magnificent."

From the situational context, this scene involves a small street vendor's stall on a relatively quiet street with few people around. Ma Youtie asks for the price of a coat but decides to walk away as he cannot afford it. The audience can see and hear Zhang Yongfu's son standing nearby, talking on the phone. After Ma Youtie leaves, Zhang Yongfu finishes his call and purchases the coat that Ma Youtie had chosen at a reduced price. The line in question is spoken by the vendor. From the communicator's perspective, the vendor quickly folds the coat, takes the money, and hands it to Zhang Yongfu's son without hesitation as she says this line. Considering the situational and communicator factors, it is clear that when the vendor says "没开张," she is not

referring to the shop being closed or any other meaning, but rather that she has not made any sales yet that day.

"谁让我今天没开张" is a response to the price negotiation, implying that she is willing to offer a lower price because he is her first customer of the day. The translation explicitly conveys this implication, making it easier for the audience to understand the intent behind the vendor's words.

(4)

- ST (Source Text): 贵英: 不抽了, 这次再也不去了。

- TT (Target Text): Don't go! Don't ever go again.

- Revised TT: We won't go! We won't ever go again.

This scene revolves around the second time Ma Youtie and Guiying are asked to donate blood. In terms of situational context, Ma Youtie and Guiying are working in an open field, making mud bricks to build a house. A white BMW drives into view, and Zhang Yongfu's son gets out of the car and approaches the couple. Ma Youtie sees him and says he'll go after finishing his work. Zhang Yongfu's son offers a cigarette, and Guiying then delivers her line. The three characters are positioned in a diagonal line: Zhang Yongfu's son, Ma Youtie, and Guiying.

From the communicator's perspective, Zhang Yongfu's son pulls out a cigarette and hands it to Ma Youtie, with a slight pursing of his lips. After Guiying says her line, Zhang Yongfu's son turns away to put the cigarette back in his pocket, then turns back to ask about the coat. The focus of the camera is on Ma Youtie's back, leaving Guiying's face out of view, which creates ambiguity about whom Guiying is addressing.

There are three potential interpretations of Guiying's statement:

1. Guiying is telling Ma Youtie not to smoke and not to go to donate blood anymore.
2. Guiying is telling Ma Youtie that he shouldn't go to donate blood again, now or in the future.
3. Guiying is addressing Zhang Yongfu's son, informing him that they won't donate blood again, now or in the future.

To resolve this ambiguity, viewers must choose the most relevant interpretation. Given the earlier scene where Zhang Yongfu's son came to ask Ma Youtie to donate blood, it becomes clear that Guiying's use of "抽" refers to blood donation, and "去" refers to going to Zhang Yongfu's son's place to donate. The question of who Guiying is addressing can be inferred from the behavior of the characters. Zhang Yongfu's son shifts his gaze from Ma Youtie to Guiying after she speaks, while Guiying does not change her focus, indicating she is speaking to Zhang Yongfu's son.

In the original Chinese dialogue, the lack of a subject does not impede understanding. However, the English translation should clarify this by restoring the subject to avoid misinterpretation. The initial translation, "Don't go! Don't ever go again," suggests a plea directed at Ma Youtie, which diverges significantly from the original meaning. The correct translation should reflect Guiying's statement as a notification or warning to Zhang Yongfu's son, and thus, "We won't go! We won't ever go again," would be a more accurate rendering.

(5)

- ST (Source Text): 贵英: 我们不献, 要献, 你们献去。张永福儿子: 你有啥要求了提出来嘛? 有铁: 我最害怕去医院里了。

- TT (Target Text): No, we won't. If you want to give blood, go ahead. Is there anything you want? I'm rather scared of going to the hospital.

In this scene, the discussion revolves around blood donation. Zhang Yongfu, who is ill and hospitalized, needs blood transfusions and specifically requires RH-negative "panda blood." Ma

Youtie, the protagonist, has this rare blood type. To support the villagers, who are concerned about their land rent and water fees, they persuade Ma Youtie to donate blood.

From the situational context, the scene takes place in the cramped and dimly lit home of Ma Youtie. Initially, the camera focuses on just the two main characters sitting by the bed. After Guiying finishes speaking, the camera shifts to reveal a crowd standing opposite them, creating a sense of pressure and confinement.

From the communicative perspective, Guiying looks down, avoiding eye contact with the crowd. She clutches a pair of tongs in one hand and a fist in the other, while Ma Youtie, with his back to the crowd, kneads dough silently. Upon being questioned by Zhang Yongfu's son, Ma Youtie pauses, crosses his hands, and wipes his face with the back of his hand. Guiying's demeanor shows resistance, while Ma Youtie appears somewhat at a loss.

In this dialogue, Ma Youtie's statement "I'm rather scared of going to the hospital" violates Grice's maxims, particularly the maxim of relation. As Mo Aiping [5: 59] notes, "A speaker may deliberately violate a maxim to let the listener infer their true intention, creating a particularized implicature." Here, Ma Youtie's statement isn't a direct request but rather a subtle way of expressing his reluctance to donate blood.

Based on the situational and communicative contexts, Ma Youtie's reluctance to donate blood is more evident. The original translation retains the implicit meaning, with the use of "rather" enhancing the underlying implication of fear. The revised translation should more clearly reflect Ma Youtie's true reluctance, and thus, a more explicit translation might be, "We won't donate blood. If you want to, you can go ahead."

5. Conclusion

Research on subtitle translation from a multimodal perspective helps to understand the film's content more accurately. By analyzing situational factors, participants, and media factors, we can better restore and convey the intended meaning of the film. Guided by conversational implicature and relevance theory, we can infer the implicit meanings of dialogues and combine them with other modalities to extract the best relevance, resulting in a more appropriate and accurate translation.

The static aspect of the film is reflected in promotional posters, showcasing the film's themes and atmosphere, while the dynamic aspect is demonstrated in the frame-by-frame plot of the film, involving sound, actor movements, and scenes. In subtitle translation, special attention needs to be paid to cultural context and pragmatic ambiguity in dialogues, as this deepens the understanding of implicit meanings and informs the selection of appropriate translation strategies.

By analyzing the subtitles of *Return to Dust*, this study aims to provide useful insights for accelerating the international dissemination of Chinese culture.

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