

# Study on the C-E Translation of Verbal Play in Films from the Perspective of SFL

## -- Taking *Nezha*, *Goodbye Mr. Loser*, and *Successor* as Examples

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### Abstract

This study, from the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), focuses on the translation of verbal play in films, exploring the preservation and reconstruction of its interpersonal and experiential meanings across languages. By analyzing typical examples of verbal play from the dialogues in *Nezha*, *Goodbye Mr. Loser*, and *Successor*, this paper reveals the core tension among creativity in language form, functional dependency, and cross-cultural adaptability in translation and proposes transcreation to compensate for cultural defaults and activate audiences' emotional resonance aiming to provide theoretical references and practical pathways for the cross-cultural communication of verbal play in audiovisual translation.

### Keywords

SFL; Verbal Play; Transcreation.

## 1. Introduction

With the deepening of global film and television cultural exchange, the translation of audiovisual works has transcended simple linguistic transfer. It has now become a crucial link in carrying cultural connotations, conveying emotional tension, and building social connections. Among various elements in film dialogues, verbal play is a common and significant linguistic phenomenon. It often manifests in forms such as witty exchanges, wordplay within specific scenes, etc., and utilizes methods like neologism creation, puns, metaphors, and idiom adaptation. Through these means, it achieves effects like humor, expression of appraisal stance, and negotiation of social relations within specific contexts. (Halliday, 1978)[1] In the context of film dialogues, the effects created by verbal play are highly dependent on the source language's structure and cultural cognition. This dependence poses dual challenges for cross-linguistic transfer-preserving the original form while effectively transferring its function. Using SFL as the theoretical framework and combining specific film cases, this paper explores pathways for the cross-cultural reconstruction of interpersonal meaning (e.g., emotion, attitude, evaluation) and experiential meaning (e.g., event logic, cultural cognition) in the translation of verbal play.

## 2. Linguistic Features and Functional Orientation of Verbal Play

### 2.1. Characteristics of Verbal Play

Verbal play essentially involves creatively breaking conventional language rules to reconstruct meaning within a specific context, thereby achieving effects such as humor, satire, or emotional expression. Its typical techniques include creating new words and parody, puns and homophony, metaphor and metonymy, and idiom adaptation and misuse. Film dialogue, as carefully crafted speech, often serves as an ideal carrier for such verbal play.

Take the film *Successor* as an example. There are two typical cases of verbal play in this film that well illustrate its core characteristics. First, the line “老大‘走’伤悲” parodies the ancient poetic phrase “老大徒伤悲”, which means if one does not exert oneself in youth, one will regret it in old age. In the film’s context, the character Ma Dajun mistakes the word “老大”, implying “in old age”, as the Northeastern dialect term for the eldest child in a family. Moreover, he mistakes the graphically similar character “徒” for “走”. By breaking the conventional meaning of the original phrase and reconstructing it in this bizarre way, it dissolves the seriousness of the original meaning and creates a comical effect and highlights Ma Dajun is ignorant and incompetent. This clearly shows how verbal play creatively breaks language rules to achieve a new meaning and effect. In the same film, the line “甲级医院真是假极了” is a homophonic pun on “甲级” (Grade-A) and “假极” (extremely fake). Using two words identical in pronunciation but opposite in meaning, it creates a semantic rupture between the surface and the depth. The audience, along with the character Chunlan, first sees the “Grade-A hospital” setup, and then learns the truth that the “hospital is a fake, and the doctors are stand-ins.” The “Grade-A hospital” symbolizes the “elite life template” that Ma Chenggang tries to create for his son, seemingly standard and top-tier, but actually a false illusion manipulated by him. This example escalates the humor from “plot absurdity” to “dual absurdity of language and plot”, also demonstrating how verbal play reconstructs meaning through breaking language conventions.

## 2.2. Main Functions of Verbal Play

From the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), language simultaneously fulfills three meta-functions in social interaction: the ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014)[2]. As a conscious linguistic strategy, verbal play, through its deviation from conventional structures, achieves a creative reconstruction of the ideational function by re-encoding experiential reality and event logic. For instance, in the line “不成……功便成仁” from *Nezha*, the speaker’s intentional stuttering creates a rhythm of momentum interruption and semantic self-rescue, which not only conveys the literal information but also constructs a mini-narrative process from hesitation to resolve, thereby intensifying the expression’s inherent tension and psychological reality. In films, verbal play is a crucial means of conveying interpersonal meaning, effectively reflecting the speaker’s emotional attitude, appraisal stance, and social role relationships, thereby strengthening the interpersonal function. For example, epithets like “大傻子,二傻子” (Blockhead) in *Goodbye Mr. Loser* are parodic forms of address. Superficially derogatory, they actually serve as affectionate teasing of simple-minded old friends within the plot’s time-travel premise, creating humor of contrast by using derogatory terms in a commendatory way.

At the textual level, verbal play plays a significant role in organizing information and creating contextual effects, particularly evident in screenplays. This is mainly manifested in playful expressions such as homophony and mishearing which are used to create misunderstandings or conflicts that directly drive the plot. For example, in a certain scene of a movie, a character mishears another’s words due to a similar-sounding phrase, leading to a series of misunderstandings that escalate the tension and move the story forward in an unexpected direction. Each character has unique ways of speaking, including vocabulary choices, sentence structures, and tones, which help the audience quickly recognize and understand their personalities. Verbal play invokes shared cultural cognition and enhances a sense of identification and immersion through parodying culturally ritualistic expressions like incantations and proverbs. By using these familiar cultural elements in a playful way, the film can connect with the audience on a deeper cultural level and make them feel more involved in the story.

### 3. The Nature and Core Contradiction of Translating Verbal Play

#### 3.1. The Nature of Translation: Cross-Cultural Reconstruction of Interpersonal-Experiential Meaning

The translation of verbal play is by no means a straightforward transfer of linguistic symbols. Essentially, it involves the creative reconstruction of the interpersonal meaning (such as emotional attitude, social relations, and appraisal stance) and experiential meaning (including specific cultural images and cognitive logic) that are embedded within the source language's specific cultural context and linguistic structure, and then presenting them in the target language. This perspective is in line with the view put forward by translation scholars Hatim and Mason. In their book *Discourse and the Translator*, they emphasized the "the Core Status of Contextual and Pragmatic Dimensions in Translation". (Hatim & Mason, 1990) For instance, the line "你妹!" from *Nezha*, literally, can be translated to "your sister". However, in the context of the film, it is often used as an exclamation to express strong negative emotions like antipathy, dissatisfaction, and even a sense of being wronged when one is misunderstood. The direct translation "Your sister!" lacks the corresponding cultural associations and pragmatic function in English, which would likely leave target-language readers confused. Therefore, the key focus of translation is not on the literal content but on accurately conveying the specific emotion at that moment, such as Nezha's antipathy, dissatisfaction, and wounded pride.

#### 3.2. The Core Contradiction of Translation: Balancing Creativity in form and Functional Dependence

The humorous or expressive artistic effect of verbal play often relies heavily on the forms of the source language, such as the phonetic similarity in puns or the cultural specificity of idioms. This constitutes the core contradiction of translation-how to balance creativity in form and functional dependence in the target language. If an excessive emphasis is placed on preservation in form, as in the case of the character Shen Gongbao stuttering and repeating the character "公" in "申公公...公...豹" in *Nezha*, the humorous effect can be lost. In the Chinese context, "公公" easily evokes associations with "eunuch", creating an unexpected comedic effect in a solemn conversation and instantly deconstructing the character's dignity. If transliterated as "Shen gong... gong...", English audience cannot perceive the semantic associations brought by the repetition of "gong", leading to a complete loss of humor. If vaguely translated as "Shen Gongbao... I mean...", it conveys the stuttering behavior but loses the satirical humor triggered by the specific culture-loaded term "公公". Preserving the form may cause the function (humor) to fail, while merely conveying the basic function may sacrifice the exquisite linguistic artistry of the source text. Therefore, successful translation often requires seeking a dynamic, creative balance between imitation in form and functional transfer, sometimes even reconstruction of a new verbal play in the target language that can produce a similar effect.

### 4. Main Difficulties in Translating Verbal Play

Viewed through the lens of SFL, translating verbal play essentially involves reconstructing the ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings realized by the source language in a specific context within the target language. The core difficulties stem from the imbalance and loss of these three metafunctions during cross-linguistic transfer.

#### 4.1. Incommensurability of Culture-Specific Experience

The ideational function of verbal play is often deeply embedded in experience models and ideologies specific to the source culture. When verbal play carries highly culture-loaded concepts, such as the ritual imperative meaning of the Taoist incantation "急急如律令" or the

Chinese hospital grading system “甲级医院” (Grade-A hospital), the transfer of experiential meaning encounters challenges. If the target culture lacks a corresponding cognitive framework, literal translation will lead to cultural default, preventing the realization of the ideational function and reducing the translation to meaningless sounds or characters, resulting in a loss of experiential meaning.

#### 4.2. Misalignment of Appraisal Stance and Emotional Attitude

Verbal play often conveys the speaker’s attitude, emotion, and judgment through specific mood, modality, and appraisal lexis, serving as an important means of realizing the interpersonal function. The appraisal stance implied in the source language is often realized through indirect cultural recognition or ironic strategies. For instance, the line “甲级医院真是假极了” from *Successor* is a homophonic pun on “甲级” (top-grade) and “假极” (extremely fake). If it is literally translated as “This Grade-A hospital is extremely fake”, the ideational meaning is retained. But since the target language cannot construct the phonological connection between “Grade-A” and “fake”, the most crucial aspect of the source sentence—the witty mockery generated by the verbal play—is lost. In essence, the misalignment represents the attenuation of interpersonal meaning during cross-lingual reconstruction when the linguistic form and pragmatic function are separated.

#### 4.3. Structural Break of the Form - Meaning Unity

The humorous or rhetorical effect of verbal play often depends on the inseparability of the linguistic form itself (e.g., phonetics, rhythm, syntactic structure) and its meaning—that is, the mechanism by which linguistic signs are organized into effective text in a specific situation. For example, the humor in “不成……功便成仁” from *Nezha* stems from the special textual structure of rhythmic break with semantic continuation created by stuttering. In this regard, when it comes to translation, if only the ideational meaning is conveyed, the textual function will be lost. Moreover, if the form is translated literally, it might prevent target-language readers from identifying it as stuttering according to their native textual comprehension conventions. This is because stuttering in English typically manifests as repetition of phonemes, words, or short phrases rather than syllable prolongation, thus causing a break in textual coherence.

### 5. Strategies for Chinese - English Translation of Verbal Play

Based on the above-mentioned difficulties, the translation of verbal play in films gives priority to the interpersonal function (e.g., humor, emotion) and the textual function (e.g., rhythm, fluency) over literal accuracy. To ensure a similar experience for the target audience, creative reconstruction within the target language is necessary to realize the maximum possible functional equivalence at the ideational, interpersonal, and textual levels. Transcreation refers to the bold, creative reconstruction of the target text within the target cultural context. It is based on a thorough understanding of the source text’s core intention, emotional color, cultural connotation, and artistic effect, while not being overly constrained by the linguistic form of the source text. It aims to produce an emotional impact, aesthetic experience, and communicative effect equivalent or similar to the source text. The following analysis of examples from the three films illustrates the positive role of transcreation in compensating for cultural default and activating public emotional resonance.

Example 1.

Source Text (ST): 老大‘走’伤悲 (*Successor*)

Target Text (TT): Make hay while the ‘son’ shines. I’m your son, too.

Analysis: The source text parodies an ancient poem and misreads “徒” as “走” (confusing the meaning of “老大” in the process), turning serious exhortation into absurd comedy and

highlighting the character's ignorance. A literal translation without adaptation would baffle English audiences. The translation ingeniously selects the English proverb "Make hay while the sun shines", which echoes the spirit of the classical parody. By using quotation marks to highlight the mishearing of "sun" as "son", it recreates the phonetic misreading across languages, just like the original. Moreover, adding "I'm your son, too." further demonstrates the complete misunderstanding. In this way, it fully reconstructs the form-meaning unity where misunderstanding a classic dissolves seriousness and creates comedy. It successfully conveys the same humorous effect in the English context, accurately shaping the character and achieving functional equivalence.

Example 2.

ST: 甲级医院真是假极了。 (*Successor*)

TT: This clinic is a clinic clean joke.

Analysis: The satire here stems from the conceptual contrast between two homophonic words "甲级" (highest institutional standard) and "假极" (ultimate falseness). A literal translation like "This Grade-A hospital is extremely fake" would fail to convey the satirical interpersonal function due to cultural cognitive differences. The translation strategically abandons the source text's framework, repeating the word "clinic" for emphasis and grafting the idiom "clean joke" (a pun on unfunny joke and seemingly clean scam), to creatively construct a new verbal play in the target language. Although the form differs greatly from the source text, it accurately conveys the core appraisal stance of the institution's name not matching reality, being essentially absurd, achieving equivalent transmission of the interpersonal function of satire.

Example 3.

ST: 申公...公...豹，不是申公公。 (*Nezha 2*)

TT: The unique... Shen gong go...bao. I said unique, not eunuch, my god.

This line involves a phonetic misunderstanding due to stuttering "公...公..." sounding like "公公"(eunuch). Its textual function (creating an unexpected turn) and interpersonal function (deconstructing the character's dignity) are closely tied to the cultural connotations of "公公". The translation does not literally reproduce the syllable pause but cleverly uses the phonetically similar English words "unique" and "eunuch" to simulate the mishearing effect. In this way, this reconstruction not only recreates the rhythm of the original, thus fulfilling its textual function, but also directly points out the punchline through the word "eunuch". As a result, it successfully conveys the comedy arising from mishearing, achieving the interpersonal function. Ultimately, it attains the cross-linguistic unity achieved in form and meaning.

Example 4.

ST: 皮特是我在美国结拜的义弟，中文名叫马彼得。 (*Successor*)

TT: Focker is my brother. His full name is Ma de Focker.

The humor originates from a name-based homophonic pun arising from the collision of Chinese and Western cultures. "皮特" and "彼得" are both transliterations of "Peter". Adding the surname "马" to "彼得" creates a pronunciation that is coincidentally similar to a Chinese vulgar term. This comical naming suits the character's unscholarly positioning and adds comedic color. If we simply transliterate it as "Peter Ma" or "Ma Bide", it would be just an ordinary name for English audiences and lose all its humorous connotation. Considering this, the translator jumps beyond the literal constraint of "皮特" or "彼得" and employs the surname "Focker" because it has a strong comedic effect in English-speaking culture (from the movie *Meet the Parents*). The creatively reconstructed Chinese name "Ma de Focker" sounds similar to the vulgar term "Motherfucker", thus creating a new homophonic pun in the target language. This new pun is functionally equivalent to, or even more impactful than, the original one, accurately reproducing the interpersonal function of creating humor through the name.

## Example 5.

ST: 你妹! (*Nezha*)

TT: I'm not a child!

As Chinese internet slang, the interpersonal meaning of the source text largely fades away. It does not refer to “your sister” but acts as an emotional particle expressing strong dissatisfaction, rebuttal, or disdain. A literal translation “Your sister!” would cause a complete pragmatic functional mismatch, leaving English audiences unable to grasp the emotional tension and merely confused. Given this situation, the translator deeply analyzes the line’s core function in the film’s specific context - Nezha’s strong protest to defend his self-esteem when misunderstood or underestimated. After understanding the interpersonal function (expressing antipathy and emphasizing self-capability), the translator does not seek a corresponding English curse word. Instead, the translator creatively reconstructs a declaration that is emotionally equivalent to the character’s situation and identity: “I’m not a child!” This successful transformation turns a culture-loaded term of abuse into a character-driven declaration. It not only accurately conveys the evaluative intention and emotional intensity of protesting being looked down upon but also strengthens the characterization of Nezha’s desire to be seen as an individual, perfectly achieving the cross-cultural transfer of interpersonal function.

## Example 6.

ST: 从来生死都看淡，专和老天对着干。 (*Nezha*)

TT: Death may come but I'm not scared, what fate says I've never cared.

The source text uses a parallel seven-character structure with end-rhyme and exaggerated imagery of disdaining life and death and defying heaven to shape the character’s rebellious spirit. Its interpersonal meaning is to declare an extreme individualistic value. A literal translation cannot convey its rhythm and force. The translator employs a sophisticated poetic reconstruction. Conceptually, “老天” is creatively replaced with “fate”, which is more universally understandable in Western culture. In addition, textually and interpersonally, the translator uses a parallel structure common in English heroic declarations-“Death may come... what fate says...”-and strong first-person subjects -“I’m not scared... I’ve never cared”-to reconstruct the resolute tone. Through the careful design of the end-rhyme between “scared” and “cared”, the translator creatively replicates the original’s rhythmic cadence. This end-rhyme not only makes the line equally rhythmic but also contributes to a solemn and resolute tone, just like a vow. As a result, it ensures that the target audience not only understands the meaning but also, through the poetic form, feels a similar emotional impact as the source audience, perfectly achieving the cross-cultural equivalent transmission of the core interpersonal function-shaping the character’s rebellious personality.

In summary, when translating verbal play in film dialogue from Chinese to English, strategies based on functional equivalence are mainly employed. Essentially, these strategies give more weight to the interpersonal and textual functions of the source text rather than sticking to literal accuracy. By adopting transcreation strategies, such as substituting cultural images, creating new homophonic puns in the target language, or reconstructing emotional intent, the problem of cultural default can be solved. This ensures that the target audience experiences emotional resonance and artistic appreciation similar to that of the source audience, and ultimately accurately achieves the core communicative functions of character portrayal and dramatic effect.

## 6. Conclusion

This study, grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics theory, examines the core issues of translating verbal play in films by analyzing dialogue translation cases from three films-*Nezha*, *Goodbye Mr. Loser*, and *Successor*. It demonstrates that the essence of translating verbal play is the cross-cultural reconstruction of the ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions realized by the source language in its specific context. The core contradiction resides in the translator's need to balance creativity inform and functional dependence. Successful translation should be guided by functional equivalence. It should prioritize the transfer of interpersonal and textual functions and, through creative translation strategies, achieve equivalent artistic effects and evoke emotional resonance in the target culture. This study also has certain limitations. Firstly, the case selection focuses on comedy films, so its translation strategies may not be fully applicable to verbal play in other genres, such as historical dramas and sci-fi films. Secondly, the proposed transcreation strategies highly rely on the translator's subjective judgment and cross-cultural literacy, and there is a lack of a systematic and objective evaluation standard for their application.

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