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Three-dimensional Transformations in the Chinese Subtitling of Animated Films: A Case Study of *Zootopia 2*

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Abstract

Subtitle translation is not merely a transfer of verbal content but a form of creative cross-cultural adaptation carried out under temporal, spatial, visual, and audience-related constraints. Taking the theatrical Chinese subtitles of Disney's animated film *Zootopia 2* as its object of study, this article applies the eco-translatological principle of three-dimensional transformation to examine how translators make adaptive selections in the linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions. Thirteen representative examples are discussed, including phonetic wordplay, coined names, animal-based collective nouns, idiomatic expressions, and character-specific dialogue. The analysis shows that successful subtitle solutions normally result from a negotiated balance rather than from formal equivalence alone. At the linguistic level, condensation, restructuring, and recreation help accommodate differences between English and Chinese. At the cultural level, explicitation, substitution, and audience-oriented naming make unfamiliar associations accessible to Chinese viewers, especially younger audiences. At the communicative level, the decisive criterion is whether the target subtitle preserves narrative clarity, humor, characterization, and emotional force. The study also identifies cases in which a formally inventive subtitle weakens the original intention, demonstrating that gains in one dimension may entail losses in another. The three-dimensional framework therefore provides a practical and nuanced basis for evaluating animated-film subtitles and extends the application of eco-translatology to audiovisual translation.

Keywords

Eco-translatology; *Zootopia 2*; subtitle translation; three-dimensional transformation; animated film

1. Introduction

1.1 Animated Films as Vehicles of Cultural Communication

Animated films combine visual exaggeration, imaginative world-building, music, and accessible storytelling. These features enable them to entertain broad audiences while circulating values and culture across linguistic boundaries. Disney animation is especially influential because it often integrates widely recognizable themes with culture-specific verbal and visual references. Research on *Zootopia* has shown that its animal world supports layered metaphor, humor, and social commentary, making language a central part of its narrative design (Ivchenko, 2021; Yilana, 2022).

The *Zootopia* series is a representative case. The first film established an anthropomorphic metropolis and explored

inclusion, aspiration, and stereotyping through the partnership between rabbit police officer Judy Hopps and fox Nick Wilde. *Zootopia 2* continues this setting and introduces further animal-based puns, coined names, intertextual references, and emotionally marked dialogue. Such features are central to the film's appeal but create substantial difficulty for English-to-Chinese subtitling. A workable translation must retain enough of the original verbal play to support the image while remaining immediately understandable to viewers who cannot pause or reread the subtitle.

1.2 Distinctive Requirements of Animated-film Subtitling

Animated-film subtitles are constrained by exposure time, screen space, speech rhythm, shot changes, and the simultaneous presence of image and sound. The translator must therefore condense meaning without disrupting narrative coherence. Studies of animated-film subtitling emphasize multimodal coordination and audience accessibility rather than sentence-level equivalence alone (Wang & Chen, 2024). For child and family audiences, three requirements are particularly important.

First, subtitles should be concise. Complex syntax and over-explicit explanation slow reading and compete with the visual track. Second, the wording should be vivid and conversational. A lively register supports characterization and matches the energetic tone of animation. Third, the translation should preserve humor whenever possible. Humor in animation often performs both an entertaining and an interpretive function: it guides attention, establishes relationships, and makes thematic content memorable. These requirements justify an adaptive approach in which formal correspondence is only one consideration among several (Cao & Zhang, 2025).

Because subtitles are only one channel in a multimodal text, omission is not necessarily a loss. Information already supplied by gesture, setting, facial expression, or a visible prop may be condensed in the verbal line. Conversely, a pun that drives a misunderstanding may require a more explicit target subtitle even when the image remains unchanged. The relevant unit of translation is therefore the complete audiovisual moment rather than the isolated sentence. For animated films, this moment also includes established character voices, recurring naming patterns, and continuity across installments. These factors form part of the environment to which the translator must adapt.

2. Eco-translatology and the Three-dimensional Framework

2.1 Theoretical Overview

Eco-translatology views translation as a process of adaptation and selection within a "translational eco-environment." This environment includes the source text, the source and target languages, the cultural contexts, the communicative situation, the author, the translator, the commissioner, and the intended audience. Translation is thus not a mechanical replacement of linguistic units but a selective activity in which the translator adapts to multiple constraints and chooses among competing solutions (Hu, 2004; Ma, 2019).

The principle of three-dimensional transformation concentrates this adaptive process in three interrelated dimensions. The linguistic dimension concerns choices in vocabulary, syntax, sound patterning, rhetoric, and textual form. The cultural dimension concerns the transfer, explanation, adjustment, or replacement of culture-specific meanings and associations. The communicative dimension concerns the realization of the source text's intention in the target context, including whether the audience understands the plot, recognizes the humor, and experiences comparable emotional effects. The three dimensions are analytical distinctions rather than isolated stages; one subtitle decision may simultaneously improve one dimension and weaken another.

2.2 Applicability to Animated-film Subtitling

The framework is methodologically suitable for animated-film subtitling for three reasons. First, it replaces a simple "correct versus incorrect" judgment with a layered account of why a translator may depart from literal form. Second, it accommodates the constraints of audiovisual translation, where speech, image, timing, character identity, and audience expectations form a dynamic environment. Third, it recognizes translator agency: under severe constraints, creative reformulation may be more responsible than formal imitation. Previous Chinese studies have used eco-translatology to examine animated subtitles and have demonstrated the explanatory value of linguistic, cultural, and communicative analysis (Zhang, 2021; Lin, 2025). The present study applies the same framework to thirteen examples from *Zootopia 2*.

3. Three-dimensional Transformations in *Zootopia 2*

3.1 Adaptive Selection in the Linguistic Dimension

Adaptive selection in the linguistic dimension involves restructuring form so that the target subtitle remains brief, natural, and functionally meaningful. *Zootopia 2* is particularly demanding because many lines rely on sound similarity, lexical blending, pauses, and animal-related naming.

Example 1
ST: Oh my God, a viper… A window wiper!
TT: 啊！有蛇！是一条雨刷！ [Ah! A snake! It is a windshield wiper!]

Nick frightens Judy by exploiting the phonetic resemblance between "viper" and "wiper." Chinese cannot reproduce this sound relation. The subtitle therefore uses the superordinate term 蛇 ("snake") and preserves the abrupt semantic shift to 雨刷 ("wiper"). The phonetic joke is lost, but the surprise generated by the visual reveal remains. This example marks a boundary of linguistic adaptation: when sound systems are incommensurable, the translator may retain narrative timing and semantic contrast rather than impossible formal equivalence.

Example 2
ST: No… Problem.
TT: 不成……问题。 [Not a… problem.]

The sloth Flash creates humor through a long pause that initially makes "No" appear to be a complete refusal. The Chinese segmentation "不成……问题" reproduces the slow delivery and postpones completion of the phrase. Because the target wording is short and the ellipsis is synchronized with performance, the subtitle achieves a comparable reversal with minimal linguistic material.

Example 3
ST: Zoogle
TT: 谷鸽 [Gu-ge; literally "valley/pigeon"]

"Zoogle" blends "zoo" and "Google" as the name of the city's search engine. 谷鸽 modifies 谷歌, the established Chinese name for Google, by replacing 歌 ("song") with the homophonous animal noun 鸽 ("pigeon"). The solution preserves brand recognition, introduces an animal element, and recreates the source word's blended structure. It is a strong instance of linguistic recreation supported by visual and contextual cues.

Example 4
ST: Stick it (a vehicle slogan)
TT: 硬啃到底 [Keep gnawing to the very end.]

The target slogan combines persistence with the animal action of gnawing. It therefore links the motivational sense of "stick with it" to the vehicle's visual identity. The Chinese is not a literal rendering, but its compact four-character rhythm and image-based verb make it effective as an on-screen slogan.

Example 5
ST: Carrot (Nick's nickname for Judy)
TT: 小不点儿 [Little one.]

The nickname refers to Judy's association with carrots, but the established Chinese rendering from the first film is 小不点儿. Although alternatives such as "little carrot" would preserve the image more directly, changing the form in the sequel would disrupt continuity for returning viewers. Here, linguistic adaptation includes inter-film consistency: the translator selects continuity over a locally more transparent metaphor.

Taken together, these examples show three linguistic strategies: compensation by semantic contrast, recreation through Chinese sound and morphology, and continuity-based retention. Their success depends on whether the chosen form can be processed within subtitle time. Reproduction of the original mechanism is desirable when feasible, but functional economy is more important when phonological or structural differences make reproduction impossible.

3.2 Adaptive Selection in the Cultural Dimension

The cultural dimension concerns meanings that are conventional in one speech community but not immediately available in another. English animal collectives, naming practices, and idiomatic formulations often require explicitation or substitution in Chinese.

Example 6
ST: You are my pack. / You are my fluffle.
TT: 你是我的依靠。/ 因为你是我的兔子窝。 [You are the one I rely on. / Because you are my rabbit home.]

"Pack" is associated with canines, while "fluffle" is a collective noun for rabbits in some varieties of English. The two characters use species-specific group terms to express belonging and home. Chinese has no equivalent productive system, and a literal phrase such as "fox group" would sound awkward or carry negative associations. 依靠 ("support") conveys emotional dependence, while 兔子窝 ("rabbit nest/home") restores warmth and an animal image. The transformation sacrifices taxonomic form to communicate intimacy in culturally accessible language.

Example 7
ST: Gary De'Snake
TT: 盖瑞·一条蛇 [Gary, a snake.]

The name plays on the French-style particle "De" and the sound of English "the," allowing Judy to mishear the introduction as "Gary the Snake." A straightforward transliteration would conceal the misunderstanding from Chinese viewers. The subtitle instead makes the mistaken parse explicit through 一条蛇 ("a snake"). Although this form is unusual as a personal name, its simplicity lets younger viewers grasp the joke immediately.

Example 8
ST: Truffler
TT: 松露露 [Song-lu-lu; a reduplicated name based on "truffle."]

The name derives from pigs' association with finding truffles. A more explanatory form meaning "truffle seeker" would be semantically clearer but cumbersome for a child-oriented character name. 松露露 retains the truffle reference and uses reduplication, a familiar and affectionate naming pattern in Chinese children's media. The choice balances cultural information with memorability and audience acceptance.

Example 9
ST: You can be right or you can be happy.
TT: 讲理赢一时，糊涂赢一世。 [Reason may win for a moment; yielding may win for a lifetime.]

The line is presented as parental wisdom. The Chinese subtitle uses parallel clauses, balanced rhythm, and a proverb-like contrast. Rather than translating "right" and "happy" mechanically, it creates a form that Chinese viewers recognize as a compact life maxim. The cultural transformation preserves genre and rhetorical authority, enabling the line to function as advice rather than as a plain logical statement.

Example 10
ST: Agree to disagree.
TT: 恕我不能赞同。 [With respect, I cannot agree.]

The English expression politely closes a disagreement. A dictionary equivalent such as 求同存异 ("seek common ground while reserving differences") would sound overly formal or institutional in many scenes. 恕我不能赞同 conveys disagreement with restraint. When the line is split near the end of the film, the subtitle can also follow the pause between apparent agreement and the final refusal, preserving both politeness and comic timing.

The cultural examples also demonstrate that domestication and foreignization are not all-or-nothing choices. A subtitle may retain a truffle reference while domesticating the naming pattern, or preserve animal imagery while replacing an unfamiliar collective noun. Cultural adaptation is most effective when it preserves the narrative reason for a line and supplies an association that the target audience can recover instantly.

3.3 Adaptive Selection in the Communicative Dimension

The communicative dimension asks whether the subtitle enables target viewers to follow the story, identify the speaker's intention, appreciate humor, and experience the intended emotion. Conversational implicature is especially important in *Zootopia* because character relationships are frequently conveyed through indirectness, teasing, and wordplay (Zhang, 2022).

Example 11
ST: Are you working this? / I mean, you're clearly working it.
TT: 有谁要抢劫吗？/ 我是说，你今天很抢眼。 [Is someone committing a robbery? / I mean, you look striking today.]

The English dialogue shifts from "working" a case to "working it," meaning looking impressive. Chinese lacks a single expression that naturally covers both senses. The subtitle links 抢劫 ("robbery") and 抢眼 ("eye-catching") through the shared character 抢. This creates visible lexical continuity, but the semantic connection is less natural than the source pun. The attempt shows that formal ingenuity does not automatically guarantee communicative success: viewers may notice the repeated character without accepting the misunderstanding as plausible.

Example 12
ST: Worth it. (Nick after releasing two hundred prisoners to save Judy)
TT: 怪我咯。 [So blame me, then.]

This rendering changes the intended attitude. "Worth it" expresses conviction that the action was justified and that the speaker has no regret. 怪我咯 typically suggests deflection, irony, or playful refusal of responsibility. The result may lead viewers to misread Nick's emotional stance. A direct "It was worth it" or a concise colloquial equivalent meaning "No regrets" would better preserve the communicative intention. The example demonstrates that fluency and topical relevance cannot compensate for a shift in illocutionary force.

Example 13
ST: I always wanted to be part of a pack… because you're my pack.
TT: 我一直想成为一个群体的一份子……你是我的依靠。 [I always wanted to be part of a group… you are the one I rely on.]

In the closing confession, "pack" conveys both species identity and the desire to belong. 群体 ("group") communicates the general notion, while 依靠 ("support") foregrounds emotional dependence. The subtitle ensures that viewers understand the relationship and the scene's sincerity, but it weakens the recurring animal metaphor of finding a home. This is a typical three-dimensional trade-off: cultural accessibility and immediate emotional clarity are gained, while part of the linguistic motif is reduced.

Communicative evaluation therefore requires attention to the whole scene, not merely to whether the target line is idiomatic. A subtitle succeeds when viewers infer the intended stance, relationship, and emotional direction at the correct moment. In this respect, a plain line that preserves intention may be superior to an ingenious line that introduces a new attitude or an implausible misunderstanding.

4. Conclusion

The Chinese subtitling of *Zootopia 2* illustrates translation as adaptive selection within a complex audiovisual environment. The translator must respond simultaneously to English wordplay, Chinese linguistic conventions, the film's images and timing, continuity with the previous installment, characterization, and the needs of a family audience. There is rarely a single "standard" solution. Forms such as Zoogle and Truffler are negotiated outcomes that privilege recognizability, animal imagery, and audience acceptance in different proportions.

The three-dimensional framework clarifies why subtitle evaluation should move beyond the binary opposition between literal and free translation. A solution may be linguistically inventive yet communicatively weak, as in the "robbery/eye-catching" pun, or culturally accessible yet less metaphorically rich, as in the rendering of "pack." Conversely, continuity, timing, and emotional force may justify departures from lexical form. The framework therefore

offers a more precise vocabulary for identifying both gains and losses.

The analysis further confirms the importance of audience design in animated-film translation. Child-oriented naming, concise syntax, rhythm, and instantly recoverable meaning are not secondary embellishments; they are part of the translational eco-environment. Translator agency is likewise central. Under conditions where a pun or culture-specific association cannot be reproduced, the translator must decide which function is most important in the particular scene. Future research could compare theatrical, streaming, dubbed, and fan-subtitle versions, or combine textual analysis with audience-response data. Such work would help refine criteria for assessing the overall degree of adaptation and selection in audiovisual translation.

The study is limited by its small, purposively selected sample and by its reliance on the theatrical version and retrospective translator commentary. It does not measure audience comprehension or compare alternative released versions. Its conclusions should therefore be understood as a close qualitative account of representative choices rather than a comprehensive assessment of the entire subtitle track.

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