



# Research on Film Subtitle Translation From the Perspective of Multimodal Discourse Analysis

## — A Case Study of the Film *The Battle at Lake Changjin*

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**Abstract.** Films serve as carriers of culture, embodying local customs and traditions. In recent years, domestic films have performed remarkably well in the film market, achieving critical acclaim and box office success. An increasing number of domestic films are entering the international market, rapidly reshaping the landscape of world cinema. However, in this process of cross-cultural communication through film as a medium, subtitle translation plays a crucial role. Subtitle translation acts as a bridge for communication between countries, underscoring its significance in internationalizing domestic films. Therefore, based on the comprehensive theoretical framework of multimodal discourse analysis, this study takes the Chinese film *The Battle at Lake Changjin* as an example. The analysis of English subtitles in the film encompasses cultural, contextual, content, and expressive aspects. Its primary objectives are to offer insights into subtitle translation in domestic films and to inspire the global promotion of Chinese culture.

**Keywords:** *The Battle at Lake Changjin*; Subtitles Translation; Multimodal Discourse Analysis

## 1 Introduction

Since the success of *Wolf Warrior 2* in 2017, patriotic films have seen rapid growth. Notable literary works like *My People, My Country*, *The Sniper*, *The Eight Hundred*, and *The Battle at Lake Changjin* have emerged in recent years. Among these red-themed films, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* stands out. The film was released in mainland China in 2021. It portrays a grand historical narrative where the Chinese People's Volunteer Army's Eastern Front forces, in the harsh and freezing conditions, demonstrated their indomitable will, and fearless spirit, and made significant contributions to the victory of the Battle of Lake Changjin.

*The Battle at Lake Changjin*, as a patriotic film with an anti-war theme, has a significant impact on shaping China's international image. It sparks curiosity for further exploration, cultural exchange, and cross-cultural understanding. The film plays a vital role in promoting China's red culture and shaping its image abroad. With increasing

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I. A. Khan et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 2024 2nd International Conference on Language, Innovative Education and Cultural Communication (CLEC 2024)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 853, [https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-263-7\\_41](https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-263-7_41)

cross-cultural exchanges and interactions between domestic and foreign films, the demand for high-quality subtitle translation has risen. This is because the quality of film subtitle translation plays a crucial role in ensuring a satisfying viewing experience<sup>[6]</sup>. This study aims to analyze the English subtitles of *The Battle at Lake Changjin* from four perspectives within the framework of multimodal discourse analysis, to provide guidance and reference for subtitle translation in domestic films, enabling them to better enter the international market.

## **2 The Theoretical Framework of Multimodal Discourse Analysis**

The theoretical framework of multimodal discourse analysis emerged in the Western world in the 1990s. It refers to the phenomenon of communication using multiple sensory modalities such as auditory, visual, and tactile, through various means and symbolic resources such as language, images, sounds, and gestures<sup>[3]</sup>. There are two criteria for multimodality: the first criterion is the number of modalities involved. This is widely accepted in the field of linguistics. The second criterion is the number of symbol systems involved. Some discourses may involve only one modality but utilize two or more symbol systems. These discourses are also considered multimodal<sup>[4]</sup>. The main theoretical foundation for discourse analysis is systemic functional linguistics, established by Halliday. He argues that language should be interpreted within the social and cultural context, where culture itself is considered a non-linguistic symbol<sup>[1]</sup>. Therefore, systemic functional linguistics theory plays a crucial role in constructing theoretical models for multimodal discourse analysis. The comprehensive framework of multimodal discourse analysis proposed by Zhang Delu is now widely used in China. The framework consists of four levels: cultural, contextual, content, and expressive. These four levels are interconnected and mutually influential. The cultural level is manifested through situational context, which determines the discourse meaning at the content level. The discourse meaning is then reflected through the form of the discourse and the inherent relationships between discourses. Ultimately, the meaning of the discourse is realized through the linguistic and non-linguistic forms of media. Film subtitle translation is a key area of multimodal research. This study focuses on the subtitle translation of the film *The Battle at Lake Changjin*. It explores the interaction, meaning transmission, and cultural expression between multimodal elements within the theoretical framework of multimodal discourse analysis proposed by Zhang Delu.

## **3 Subtitle Translation of *The Battle At Lake Changjin* From the Perspective of Multimodal Discourse Analysis**

The movie *The Battle at Lake Changjin* takes the battle of Changjin Lake as the main line, and the movie restores the battle scene of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army at that time, showing the patriotic feelings and national righteousness of the Chinese people. It demonstrates the spirit of China's great resistance and aid to North Korea,

known as the "War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea". *The Battle at Lake Changjin* is a typical military-themed film, with its storyline based on real historical events in China. Therefore, in the process of international dissemination, translators must pay special attention to the accuracy of subtitle translation. Otherwise, it may hurt the revelation, reenactment, and representation of historical facts.

Multimodal discourse analysis provides a new perspective for subtitle translation research. The following will take the film *The Battle at Lake Changjin* as an example, take the multi-modal theoretical framework proposed by Professor Zhang Delu as the theoretical basis, and discuss how each element complements each other from the four dimensions of culture, context, content, and expression, combined with specific cases, to jointly construct the communicative meaning and discourse meaning of the film.

### 3.1 The Cultural Level

Nida once pointed out that "the most serious translation errors are often caused not by the improper expression of words, but by incorrect cultural assumptions."<sup>[2]</sup> Cultural factors significantly influence viewers' understanding of film content<sup>[3]</sup>. Subtitling translation in films is not a simple linguistic conversion but is also influenced by cultural considerations and limitations. Chinese films carry unique cultural values, making translation complex. Film translators must pay attention to cultural phenomena depicted in the film, understanding the cultural connotations and adjusting them to match the target language accurately. This ensures the transmission of intended meanings and enhances foreign audiences' comprehension of the film.

In terms of the names of individuals and locations, the translator made distinct decisions considering the context and cultural disparities. The Wade-Giles romanization method was used for place names, such as "安东 (Antung)", and "元山 (Wonsan)". It allows English speakers to approximate Chinese pronunciation easily. For personal names, different translation methods were employed. For example, "老大 (Baili)" and "老二 (Qianli)" was used for "oldest son" and "second oldest son", respectively. In Chinese culture, parents rank their children's names based on their age, using terms like "oldest son" and "second oldest son." This reflects the strong emphasis on family and kinship. In contrast, Western households have a comparatively diminished emphasis on familial bonds. The translator took these cultural differences into account and integrated the expression forms of both the source and target cultures.

Regarding culturally loaded words, the translator made clever choices. For example, a line expressing excitement was adapted to "Lei, great job!" to ensure foreign audiences' understanding. Similarly, "Mother bless me!" was translated as "God save me!" to reflect the cultural difference between Chinese reverence for ancestors and Western belief in divine intervention. The translator's adaptations effectively convey the intended meanings while resonating with Western audiences.

### 3.2 The Context Level

The contextual level refers to the constraints imposed by specific contexts, including the range, tone, and manner of discourse determined by contextual factors<sup>[3]</sup>. Context

can be divided into situational context, textual context, and cultural context. When translating subtitles, translators should fully consider the context and background in which the dialogues take place. This requires the translator to use wisdom and carefully weigh the influence of linguistic and non-linguistic elements on the lines, to make the translation close to the plot at the time.

As an illustration, in the film's opening, Wu Qianli knelt before his parents with the urn of his brother Wu Baili's ashes, he confesses, "I failed to properly care for my elder brother." This expression, deeply rooted in the Chinese cultural context for the death of his brother, might be obscure to foreign audiences. Therefore, the translator simplifies it to "Baili is gone," directly conveying Wu Baili's death for clearer understanding internationally. Besides, when recalling the scene of his brother Wu Baili's sacrifice, Wu Qianli says, "He asked me to help him." The translator, considering the contextual background, translates the dialogue as "He asked me to help him take his life." For Wu Baili, death may be the best relief. After "help", the translator added "take his life", which reflects the translator's deep thought to avoid confusion. The author has keenly grasped the contextual meaning of the lines, adding tragic color to the film and highlighting the greatness of the characters.

### 3.3 The Content Level

The content level of discourse is classified into two distinct components: the level of discourse meaning and the level of discourse form<sup>[3]</sup>. The former includes interpersonal, textual, and conceptual meanings, which are constrained by discourse style, tone, and scope. The form-level discourse meaning necessitates the amalgamation of various modalities, including character dialogues, visual elements within the film, and the accompanying background music, to create a cohesive and comprehensive narrative. Therefore, when translating films, translators need to consider multiple modalities to seek the best conversion between different languages.

At the level of discourse meaning, in the film *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, facing the continuous advance of the US forces towards the Yalu River, Chairman Mao uses the phrase "唇亡齿寒" to describe the close relationship between China and North Korea at that time, the meaning is "Lips and teeth are interdependent". This Chinese idiom illustrates the close and interdependent relationship between two parties, suggesting that if one is harmed, the other will also suffer. The newly established People's Republic of China faced threats from both internal and external hostile forces. When the US military launched a significant attack on North Korea, it posed a direct threat to China's security, making it crucial for China to support Korea or risk appearing weak. Consequently, China had to send troops. The translator captures the essence of this critical alliance in the subtitles by translating as "We're in the same boat.", effectively conveying to international audiences the interdependence and urgency of China's actions<sup>[5]</sup>.

At the level of discourse form, the film features several memorable scenes. One notable scene occurs on the eve of the Battle at Lake Chanjin, where American soldiers hold a Thanksgiving celebration at their camp. They enjoy plentiful supplies, delicious roast Turkey, and hot coffee in a warm and relaxed atmosphere. The background music

is cheerful, highlighting the arrogance of the American army. However, the camera then shifts to our 7th Company soldiers, who are enduring freezing conditions in the snow, lacking food, and eating frozen potatoes. The strong visual and auditory contrast constructed by the multi-modal elements brings a huge psychological impact on the audience.

### 3.4 The Expressive Level

Subtitle translation involves converting the protagonist's dialogue into written symbols, considered pure language. Non-linguistic symbols, such as sound effects and visual scenes, also play a significant role in conveying meaning. The combination of language media and non-language media assists in transmitting linguistic meaning effectively. One scene in the film highlights the significance of combining different language media to convey emotions effectively. As the film reached its climax, bold white Chinese characters appeared on a stark black background, delivering a powerful message: "伟大的抗美援朝精神历久弥新！伟大的中国人民志愿军烈士永垂不朽！". The translation is done by enlarging and bolding the Chinese characters and placing them in the center of the screen, which is usually placed in front of the English subtitles, while the English remains at the normal place with the same font and size. This translation strategy has a significant visual and emotional impact on the audience, effectively celebrating the perseverance and selfless sacrifice of the Chinese volunteer soldiers. With the accompaniment of background music, this combination of text and vision undoubtedly moved every audience and achieved the best movie effect.

After careful consideration, the translator adopts a non-ellipsis method and translates all three instances of "Don't..." in order to capture the portrayal of Lei Gong's speech. He spoke with a trembling voice, heavily wounded and near death. This translation choice reflects his unclear and intermittent speech, as he struggled to breathe before passing away. Accompanied by melancholic background music, it prompts deep reflection while highlighting the cruelty of war.

## 4 Conclusion

Movies, as a medium of cultural exchange, play a vital role in today's cross-cultural communication. Subtitle translation, as a bridge connecting different cultures, also plays an important role. This article attempts to analyze and appreciate the subtitle translation in the movie *The Battle at Lake Changjin* from the perspectives of culture, context, content, and expression, using Professor Zhang Delu's comprehensive language analysis framework of multimodal discourse. By analyzing the film's subtitles, we can better assist in conveying the essence of the film to foreign audiences, thus aiding in the global dissemination of Chinese cinema.

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