

An Imagological Analysis of Subtitle Translation in Zootopia: A Translation Studies Perspective

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Abstract. As movie culture spreads worldwide, subtitle translation has become vital for connecting different cultures. Fundamentally speaking, it shapes how audiences understand characters and the ideologies they symbolize. However, present studies on subtitle translation in animated movies still face limitations. In terms of character images, they do not fully examine the impact of cross-cultural factors in the process of translating character images, nor do they often discuss the stereotype-breaking traits of characters in cross-cultural transmission. Using Zootopia as the subject, this study investigates the impact of subtitle translation on the image-building of main characters Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde through qualitative analysis, which involves comparing English dialogues and Chinese subtitles. Research indicates that literal translation often reinforces cultural stereotypes because it overlooks subtle nuances in the translation process. In comparison, localized and hybrid translation strategies take the initiative to build cross-cultural connections, balancing cultural factors more effectively and making the story content and characters more authentic. In such translation, it is essential to consider how to make the content understandable to people from different cultures. This way, characters that subvert conventional expectations can be more readily accepted across diverse cultural contexts. This study not only gives suggestions to the area of audiovisual translation but also reveals that subtitle translation methods have a deep influence on building animated characters' images. Through exploring how foreignization and domestication can be flexibly used together, it clearly explains how translation choices affect how stereotype-breaking characters are accepted across different cultures.

Keywords: Imagology, subtitle translation, Zootopia, character representation, cross-cultural communication

1. Introduction

Audiovisual media have become essential for sharing thoughts and cultural content. In a world where cultures interact more and more, subtitles make it possible for audiences of different languages to understand the content. In animated movies, animals are often given human-like qualities. This lets them show complex ideas like justice, personality, and prejudice more clearly, making it easier for people to understand these important social issues. But how well these stories

connect with people depends largely on subtitle making. Differences in language and culture can change how viewers see the characters, and even hide what the story was originally trying to say.

This issue can be clearly observed in the well-known film *Zootopia*. The movie centers on fox Nick and rabbit Judy. Using their journey, it discusses the typical stereotypes about animals and links those to real-life problems with discrimination. Since the film intentionally makes main characters that go against stereotypes, it is a great example for studying how subtitle translation affects audiences' understanding. Yet, recent studies haven't paid enough attention to how cultural factors and translation approaches support these stereotype-breaking characters.

Studies on translating subtitles for animated television can be divided into three main types. Making appropriate translations in meaning and form is at the top of the initial category—for example, in their 2025 study, Liang and Qin used the “Functional Equivalence Theory” to analyze the English subtitle translation of the film *Hidden Blade* [1]. They pointed out that the key to subtitle translation lies in not only corresponding to the literal meaning of the original text but also conveying the deep meaning hidden behind the original text effectively. The second category examines transmitting cultural ideas and symbols [2,3], as shown in Yan's 2025 study focusing on *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, he used the “Reception Theory” to study how subtitle translation can fit the cultural cognitive habits of target audiences [4].

The third covers uses of cultural theory that are not complete or are not straightforward [5,6]. These approaches frequently examine language and culture separately and do not pay enough attention to how perceptions and images affect them, which is a major hindrance. There are still not fully aware of how to translate characters who conflict with stereotypes.

This study examines how transforming subtitles affects how people perceive Nick and Judy to address this problem. It addresses two questions: (1) how different translation methods influence the representation of characters beyond stereotypes, and (2) how cultural differences affect the portrayal of these characters in Chinese subtitles. To explore these issues, discourse from both protagonists is compared between the English storyline—taken from the original *Zootopia* script [7]—and the official Chinese subtitles, with the lines classified into four functional categories: humor, personal reflection, emotional expression, and social critique.

This review makes significant contributions to the field of imagology by including spoken dialogue, showing how translation choices can result in images that conflict with stereotypes. It provides good advice for those who create subtitles in plain English. It demonstrates that changing the information is more effective than simply translating it into other languages. This helps audiences from different backgrounds understand the message.

2. Imagology in film subtitle translation

Meng states that imagology is the study of how people perceive others from different cultures [8]. It also examines how people share ideas about these individuals. This theoretical framework is helpful. It explains how translations carry both character traits and hidden meanings. This is also proven by Wang's research, which provides further evidence [9]. He used the “Skopos Theory” to analyze the subtitle translation of *Zootopia* and found that the goal of “properly conveying the characters' images” directly determines which translation method to choose [10]. Key ideas of this approach include cultural filtering, stereotypes, and changes in perception. These are closely linked to subtitle translation methods. For instance, a study about *The Shawshank Redemption* showed that if you use imagology to look at character dialogue translations, you can easily see how cultural stereotypes affect how well a character is shown. This helps when analyzing Nick and Judy's images in this research [11].

2.1. Stereotypes and subtitle translation

The words selected by individuals, and the varying interpretations of these words across different cultural contexts, influence the perceptions that people hold toward specific groups [5]. For example, the English phrase “sly fox” as an example. When it is translated into Chinese as “狡猾的狐狸”, it often feels more negative. That’s because in Chinese, “狐狸” carries a harsher, more critical vibe than it does in English. But if a translator uses a phrase like “机灵的狐狸” (clever fox) instead, it keeps the sense that the character is smart. And at the same time, it eases the weight of those old, negative stereotypes. This way, the character’s traits are presented more clearly, while views that are out of date may end up being reinforced.

2.2. Image variation and subtitle translation

Image variation examines how social representations change when translated into other cultures. This often happens because certain features are emphasized while others are less important [12]. In the classic English translation, a writer's sarcasm is depicted as a combination of irony and buried warmth, for instance. Using colloquialisms like “这家伙嘴真贫” to express this subtly can be more accurately expressed in Chinese. A strong translation like “他很刻薄” ignores the deeper feelings that underlie the words.

2.3. Cultural filtering and subtitle translation

Translators’ interpretations of other cultures are influenced by their cultural backgrounds through cultural filtering. For instance, if one considers the Chinese view that values community, the proverb “anyone can be anything” comes from Western conceptions of independence. In the Chinese version of Zootopia “在动物城,谁都能活出精彩”, as one might put it. The initial inspirational message is preserved in this type, but it is placed more in a way that emphasizes the party and connects with cultural values.

3. Zootopia: background and subtitle translation context

In a busy area full of talking animals, Zootopia looks at the unjust treatment in the world: animals that are seen as predators are thought to be unsafe, while smaller animals like rabbits are often looked down on as poor. By becoming the first rabbit to visit the police force, Judy Hopps, a rabbit, challenges cruel stereotypes about her type. She collaborates with Nick Wilde, who suffers unfair treatment from stereotypes. Together, they discover a storyline that exploits people's aversion to unsafe groups.

The interactions in the film help show its message against discrimination. These interactions help develop the main characters, making them more detailed and interesting. For example, they reveal Judy’s optimism alongside Nick’s concealed sensitivity. Additionally, it makes inconvenient remarks about the world. Making subtitles for Zootopia requires balancing several crucial tasks: changing cultural references to fit Chinese ideas, ensuring consistency of the characters’ voices (so that their resistance to stereotypes is obvious in all languages), and ensuring comprehensibility across age groups (clearly for kids and more subtle for adults). More exactly, this includes two main things. First, the “fun adaptation” of funny lines: a study about Zootopia’s subtitles, for example, mentioned that translating Nick’s sarcastic words with everyday Chinese helps keep the film’s light, playful tone [13]. Second, the “cultural adaptation” of values: another study pointed out that phrases like

“anyone can be anything” need to be changed to “在动物城,谁都能活出精彩” so they fit Chinese audiences’ focus on “collective success” [14].

4. Impact of subtitle translation on the representation of Nick wilde and Judy hopps in Zootopia

4.1. Core character traits and imagological expectations

Nick challenges the conventional image of the “deceitful fox” by employing sarcastic and informal speech, transforming cunning into a tool for building relationships rather than manipulation. Meanwhile, Judy resists the cliché of the “fearful rabbit” through determined and idealistic expression, reframing typically rabbit-like qualities—such as diligence—as assets in combating inequality [9].

Within the Chinese cultural context, the term “fox” (狐) carries associations with cunning drawn from traditional tales, whereas “rabbit” (兔) implies obedience and gentleness. Subtitlers thus face the challenge of rendering Nick’s irony in a manner that retains his charm—consistent with the archetype of the endearing outsider—while adapting Judy’s resoluteness to reflect the nuanced idea of “柔中有刚” (firmness within gentleness), thereby aligning character portrayals with local audience expectations [2,15].

4.2. Translation strategies and their influence on character images

To explore how subtitle translation shapes the imagological consistency of Nick and Judy’s stereotype-breaking traits, this study conducts qualitative textual analysis of 50 representative lines (25 per character) from Zootopia. Lines are categorized by function: humor (Nick), motivational rhetoric (Judy), vulnerability (both), and social critique (both). This analysis integrates concepts from imagology, cross-cultural translation studies, and investigations into the Chinese reception of Zootopia [2,6,8]. It explores the extent to which literal, localized, and hybrid translation strategies maintain or alter the film’s essential characteristics. The study situates these strategies within the context of cultural stereotypes and audience expectations discussed earlier.

4.2.1. Literal translation

A literal translation of Nick’s phrase “Sly fox, dumb bunny” into Chinese as “狡猾的狐狸,愚蠢的兔子” may intensify existing stereotypes. The Chinese term “狡猾” (cunning) carries a harsher connotation. It fails to convey the original’s playful, teasing tone. This literal translation approach diminishes the subtle humor inherent in the source text. It also renders the negative implications more prominent.

4.2.2. Localized translation

Making content more appropriate for the traditions of a particular culture can help address traits that conflict with stereotypes. This matches Liang’s idea of “acceptance and recreation” in translation. Translators need to “recreate” the original text’s form while keeping its core meaning, so foreign works can be accepted by the target audience [16]. The local term “机灵鬼” (clever imp) includes “鬼” which means a playful spirit and does not have a very negative connotation when Nick is called a “wise guy.” Judy’s exciting saying “Anyone can be something” is changed to “在动物城,谁

都能活出精彩”——as a study on Adaptation Theory points out, which links her positive outlook to beliefs that are important in Chinese tradition, like working together and achieving true success [14].

4.2.3. Hybrid translation

In this translation, “混口饭吃” means simply struggling to survive. This particular choice of words serves to show Nick as someone who remains determined to carry on even when life gets tough. Judy even acknowledged her mistake. The original lines “I made a mistake. But I’m going to fix it” are translated into Chinese as “我犯了错,但我会弥补.” Using “弥补” (to compensate) here emphasizes her willingness to take responsibility and correct the error she made. This choice highlights the theme of accountability in her character.

4.3. Translation strategies and their influence on character images

Translating subtitles is a purposeful process of imagological reconstruction, requiring translators to handle both cultural stereotypes and differences in language. Its core aim is to accurately show Chinese audiences the traits of Nick and Judy that go against stereotypes. Two important cross-cultural factors influence this translation work. One is the uneven nature of stereotypes, and the other is the differences in language details.

4.3.1. Stereotype asymmetry

Cultural disparities in the intensity of stereotypes necessitate adaptive translation strategies. For instance, the Chinese term for “fox” (狐) evokes stronger negative cultural connotations than its English equivalent, leading subtitlers to employ softened or affectionate descriptors such as “鬼” (imp) when referring to Nick. Conversely, since “rabbit” (兔) traditionally implies obedience and meekness, phrases like “不轻言放弃” (never easily give up) are introduced to temper Judy’s determination, making her resolve more culturally acceptable [6,8].

4.3.2. Linguistic nuance gaps

Divergences in linguistic expressivity further require an emphasis on functional over formal equivalence. Liang and Qin said in their study on *Hidden Blade* that “when language forms can’t match completely, focusing first on passing on functional meaning—like tone and feeling—is the key to good subtitle translation.” [1]. Sarcasm in English, often conveyed through tonal inflection as in Nick’s lines, may be rendered in Chinese using modal particles like “啦” to maintain a lighthearted and witty tone. Judy’s concise and emphatic statements are similarly adapted through rhythmically intensified phrasing, exemplified by “我能,我一定能做到” (I can, I will make it happen). The goal of this adaptation is to maintain the original dialogue’s feeling of urgency and strong belief [17].

5. Conclusion

This research explores how subtitle translation shapes the cultural image profiles of Nick Wilde and Judy Hopps in *Zootopia*, focusing on the connection between translation methods and the creation of their identity as characters who subvert expectations. Through qualitative analysis of dialogues grouped by function, it explains how various translation approaches allow the two characters’ key traits to be shared across cultures.

Research reveals that strict literal translation, which translates word by word, tends to lose the traits of characters that break fixed impressions. Literal translation focuses too much on matching words exactly. This approach can inadvertently impose the translator's cultural biases, resulting in either a more negative portrayal of the character's social group or a dilution of the very traits that challenge stereotypes. However, localized translation adjusts lines according to the cultural habits of the target region. This allows audiences to better resonate with the characters. Hybrid translation, on the other hand, balances preserving the original tone as much as possible and ensuring local understanding. Both methods better maintain the story's depth. They also truly convey the characters' traits that break biases to the audience.

To be specific, differing entrenched stereotypes and nuanced linguistic gaps pose significant challenges for translators, who must make careful adjustments to avoid distorting the characters' original traits. This helps preserve the subtle tone of the original text within people's existing fixed impressions.

These research findings align with the view that subtitle translation is a conscious act of reconstructing images. In such reconstruction, culturally aware selections are key to expressing characters that go against stereotypes. However, this study has some limitations. It only looks at *Zootopia* and its English-to-Chinese subtitling. Due to the narrow range of the study, its results might not be suitable for other animated movies or language combinations. Future research could encompass various film genres, additional language pairs, and audience reception studies. This will help make clearer how imagological factors work in different cultural and language environments. Overall, this study offers valuable insights for academic research on character portrayal in translated media. It also promotes better cross-cultural communication through animated storytelling.

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