

# A Study on Subtitle Translation of BBC Documentary Films from the Perspective of Relevance Theory—Taking *Earth's Pulse* as an Example

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## Abstract

This paper conducts an in-depth exploration of the subtitle translation strategies and their effectiveness in the BBC documentary *Earth's Pulse* from the perspective of Relevance Theory. As a significant theoretical framework in translation studies, Relevance Theory emphasizes cognitive effort and contextual effects during the translation process, providing robust theoretical support for subtitle translation. This study selects *Earth's Pulse* as a case study and, through meticulous analysis of its subtitle translations, examines how the translator effectively conveys the original film's intent while maintaining linguistic fluency and cultural appropriateness. The findings reveal that the translator employed various strategies—such as direct translation, paraphrasing, omission, and addition—to achieve optimal relevance between the source and target texts. These strategies not only ensure that the audience accurately comprehends the documentary's content but also facilitate communication and integration between Chinese and English cultures. Furthermore, this paper discusses the significance of subtitle translation in documentary dissemination, as well as the applicability and limitations of Relevance Theory in subtitle translation research.

**Keywords:** subtitle translation; Relevance Theory; *Earth's Pulse*; cross-cultural communication.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary era of globalization, the exchange of cultural products and media content has become increasingly prevalent. Documentaries, as a form of visual media, play a significant role in bridging cultural gaps and fostering cross-cultural understanding (Nornes, 2007; Pérez-González, 2014). The BBC, renowned for its high-quality documentaries, has long been a source of inspiration and education for viewers worldwide. Among its numerous offerings, *Earth's Pulse* (or *Planet Earth* as it is commonly known) stands out as a prime example of the BBC's commitment to presenting the wonders of our planet in captivating visuals and engaging narratives.

However, the success of such documentaries depends not only on their visual and auditory elements but also on the quality of their subtitles. Subtitles serve as a vital bridge between the audiovisual content and audiences who may not be fluent in the original language. They are essential not only for conveying information but also for preserving the aesthetic value and cultural nuances of the original work (Cintas & Remael, 2021).

This paper aims to explore the subtleties and complexities of subtitle translation in BBC documentaries, specifically focusing on *Earth's Pulse* as a case study. We adopt the perspective of Relevance Theory, a cognitive pragmatic theory that has gained widespread recognition in translation studies. Relevance Theory posits that translation is a cognitive-inferential process where the translator selects the most relevant interpretation from the source text and conveys it to the target audience. By applying this theoretical framework, we hope to gain a deeper understanding of how subtitle translators navigate between linguistic, cultural, and contextual factors to produce accurate and engaging translations.

The study involves a detailed analysis of the subtitle translations in *Earth's Pulse*, examining their linguistic features, cultural adaptations, and contributions to narrative coherence and flow. We also explore the challenges faced by translators in balancing accuracy, readability, and cultural sensitivity.

Moreover, this paper aims to contribute to the existing body of research on subtitle translation, particularly in the context of BBC documentaries. By

elucidating the translation strategies employed in *Earth's Pulse*, we hope to provide valuable insights for future translators and researchers. Ultimately, this study seeks to enhance the quality of subtitle translations, thereby enriching cross-cultural viewing experiences for global audiences.

## 2. Relevance Theory and Subtitle Translation

### 2.1 Relevance Theory

Relevance Theory is a theory of linguistic communication interpretation proposed by scholars Sperber and Wilson in the 1980s, the core content of which is communication and cognition (Gutt, 2000; Sperber & Wilson, 1995). Relevance Theory emphasizes that the key to human communication lies in the ability to reason, i.e., the speaker expresses his/her communicative intention through words, while the listener reasons out his/her real intention based on the speaker's explicit behavior, so as to realize the purpose of linguistic communication. In the framework of correlation theory, the success of communication depends on two conditions: the mutual understanding between communicators and the relevance of cognitive models.

Relevance theory suggests that relevance is a property that can be realised without representation, let alone calculation. When it is expressed, it is expressed in terms of comparative judgements and approximate absolute judgements, and not in terms of fine absolute judgements, i.e. quantitative judgements (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/1995: 132). Thus, relevance theory presents the following degree of relevance conditions: Degree of Relevance Condition 1: The relevance of a hypothesis in the context is the degree to which it is influential in the context. Relevance theory suggests that there is no need to consider co-operation between sender and receiver in the communication process, because communication depends on relevance. Sperber and Wilson proposed two principles of relevance, the first known as the communicative principle and the second as the cognitive principle. The latter, however, are not principles to be observed by communicators, but general principles used to explain cognitive procedures in communication. Every discourse (or other inferential communicative act) conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance. Or rather (every superficial stimulus conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance), human cognition tends to maximize relevance.

### 2.2 Relevance Theory in Translation

Since Gutt introduced the association theory into translation research in 1991, the theory has had a far-reaching impact in the field of translation. According to Gutt, translation is a kind of verbal communication activity, which is a reasoning process closely related to the brain mechanism. From the perspective of correlation theory, translation is a process from ideation to reasoning in which the translator plays a dual role. Firstly, when reading the source text, the translator needs to infer the

author's explicit interactional behavior based on the cognitive context in order to find the relevance. Second, when the translator reproduces the source text in the target language, he becomes a communicator and needs to express the relevant information inferred from the source text to the target reader according to the target reader's context so that the reader can get maximum relevance with minimum reasoning effort.

Gutt suggests that "successful translation, like the situation in the Explicit-Reasoning Model, is consistent with the theory of association. Gutt concludes: "Translation is a communicative act that produces dynamic reasoning in a dynamic context. The basis of reasoning is precisely association."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, achieving optimal correlation is not only a criterion for communication but also a criterion for translation. Gutt places great emphasis on the translator's role in translation, pointing out that translation in fact involves three subjects and two explicit - reasoning processes, between the original text and the translator is the first explicit - reasoning process, in which the first explicit - reasoning process takes place. -reasoning process, in which the original text is equivalent to the speaker and the translator is equivalent to the listener. The first communication is realised through the original text's explicitness and the translator's reasoning. Between the translator and the audience is the second explicit-reasoning process, in which the translated text is equivalent to the speaker and the translated audience is equivalent to the listener, and the second communication is realised through the explicitness of the translated text and the reasoning of the translated audience. Successful translation requires that both explicit-reasoning processes are successful, which means that in the first explicit-reasoning process, the translator's understanding of the original text should be in line with the original author's expectations of the source language audience, and in the second explicit-reasoning process, the translator's understanding of the original text should be in line with the original author's expectations of the source language audience--reasoning process, the translator should have a reasonable judgement about the cognitive environment and level of the audience of the target language. If one of the two explicit-reasoning processes fails, the translation will fail. It can be seen that the role and responsibility of the translator is very important in the theory of associative translation, and the formation of the best association between the audience of the translated language and the original language depends on the translator to play a good role as a bridge, that is to say, the translator should make sure that the explicit linguistic stimuli in the translated language are the same as the explicit linguistic stimuli in the source language.

### 2.3 Relevance Theory and Subtitle Translation

As a special form of translation, subtitle translation has its unique characteristics and challenges. Firstly, subtitle translation needs to accurately convey

the information of the original film in limited time and space, which requires the translator to have a high degree of generalization and refinement ability (Bogucki, 2009; Pedersen, 2011). Secondly, subtitle translation also needs to take into account the cultural background and cognitive environment of the target audience to ensure that the information is effectively conveyed. The theory of association provides a strong theoretical support for subtitle translation. According to the correlation theory, the success of subtitle translation depends on whether the translator can make appropriate judgement and estimation of the target audience's cognitive environment on the basis of correctly understanding the original film, and adopt appropriate translation strategies, so that the target audience can get the maximum contextual effect with the least amount of reasoning effort.

## 2.4 Application of Relevance Theory in Subtitle Translation

**In subtitle translation, the application of association theory is mainly reflected in the following aspects:**

**Selection of Translation Strategies:** According to the association theory, translators need to select the translation strategies that are most relevant to the cognitive environment of the target audience, such as direct translation, paraphrase, omission, addition, etc., in order to ensure that the information is effectively conveyed.

**Handling of cultural factors:** Subtitle translation often involves the conversion of cultural factors. Relevance theory requires translators to consider the cultural background and cognitive environment of the target audience when dealing with cultural factors to avoid cultural misunderstandings and conflicts (Chiaro, 2009; Pedersen, 2011).

**Utilisation of context:** the association theory emphasises the importance of context in translation. In subtitle translation, translators need to make full use of contextual information, such as context, picture, sound, etc., to infer the informational intent and communicative intent of the original film and translate accordingly.

By applying the theory of association, subtitle translation can more accurately convey the information of the original film, while maintaining the natural fluency of language and the appropriate communication of culture, thus enhancing the quality and effect of subtitle translation.

### 2.4.1 Contextual Relevance

Contextual relevance is crucial in subtitle translation. The content of the documentary film *Earth's Pulse* is rich and diverse, including natural landscape, biological behaviour, scientific explanation and other aspects. In the process of translation, the translator needs to take into full consideration the specific context in which the subtitles are located, and make sure that the translation is consistent with the original text in terms of

context. For example, when describing the behaviour of a certain animal, the translator needs to accurately understand the biological significance behind it and transform it into an expression that meets the comprehension ability of the target language audience. In addition, non-linguistic elements such as images and soundtracks in documentaries also provide important contextual information for subtitle translation, and translators need to consider these factors comprehensively to achieve the best contextual relevance.

### 2.4.2 Cultural Relevance

As a global documentary film, *Earth's Pulse* involves cultural elements from many countries and regions. In subtitle translation, cultural associations should not be neglected as well. Translators need to understand the differences and similarities between different cultures and adopt appropriate translation strategies to deal with cultural elements. For example, when translating certain words or expressions with specific cultural connotations, the translator can adopt methods such as interpretation, analogy or substitution to ensure that the target language audience understands the meaning. At the same time, translators also need to pay attention to avoid introducing cultural elements that may cause misunderstanding or conflict in the translation process, in order to maintain the accuracy and appropriateness of cultural associations.

### 2.4.3 Recipient relevance

Receiver association is one of the core concepts of association theory, which emphasises that translation should meet the needs and expectations of the target language audience. In the subtitle translation of *Earth's Pulse*, the receiver association is mainly reflected in the following aspects: firstly, the translator needs to understand the cultural background, knowledge level and viewing habits of the target-language audience in order to choose the appropriate translation method and language style; secondly, the translator needs to pay attention to the audience's cognitive ability and acceptance to ensure that the subtitle translation is easy to understand and appealing; lastly, the translator needs to take into account the aesthetic needs of the audience and try to convey the information while retaining the artistic style and expression of the original film. Finally, the translator also needs to consider the aesthetic needs of the audience and strive to convey the message while retaining the artistic style and expressiveness of the original film.

In order to achieve receiver relevance, translators can use a variety of translation strategies. For example, when translating scientific explanations or professional terms, the translator can adopt simple and clear language to explain or replace them, so as to reduce the audience's cognitive burden; when translating descriptive language or emotional expressions, the translator can focus on the vividness and infectiousness

of the language, so as to enhance the audience's viewing experience. In addition, translators can also make use of the space and time limitations of subtitles to improve the readability and attractiveness of subtitles by adjusting the layout, font and colour of subtitles.

### 3. Overview of Documentaries and Its Subtitles

#### 3.1 Definition and classification of documentary films

The term “documentary” was first coined in England by John Grierson, a student of Robert Flaherty, the “father of the documentary”. Although he first proposed the term documentary film, he did not give a precise definition of documentary film. Different scholars have different definitions of documentary film. Different scholars have different definitions of documentary film, but in general, the biggest characteristic of documentary film is its “authenticity”, which distinguishes documentary film from films, TV dramas and stories.

From different perspectives, documentaries can be divided into different types. American scholar Bill Nicole (2001) divided documentaries into six categories from the perspective of their presentation methods: poetic mode, expository mode, observational mode and participatory mode, reflective mode, and performative mode. Different types of documentaries have different focuses, poetic documentary focuses on the poetic expression techniques of the documentary, and neglects the content and central idea; illustrative documentary focuses on the narration and illustration of a truth, aiming to persuade the audience.

The illustrative documentary focuses on narrating and explaining a truth, aiming to persuade the audience to accept the central idea, while neglecting visual enjoyment.

Observational documentaries focus on real life and real events; Participatory documentaries are usually presented in the form of interviews. Participatory documentaries are usually presented in the form of interviews, and the producer of the documentary usually participates in the documentary.

Reflective documentaries usually evoke the viewer's reflection on the documentary and trigger the viewer's thinking; Synthetic documentaries are permeated with the subjective colours of the producer and are usually subjective and oriented. Reflective documentaries usually evoke the audience's reflection on the documentary and stimulate their thoughts.

### 3.2 Limitations of Subtitle Translation for Documentary Films

#### 3.2.1 Technical Restrictions

Time and space constraints: Subtitle translation must present enough information in a limited time, while not occupying too much screen space so as not to interfere with the audience's visual experience

(Pedersen, 2011; Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2007). This requires the translator to refine and reorganise the original text to adapt to the presentation form of subtitles.

Font and font size restrictions: Visual elements such as font, font size and colour of subtitles also affect the audience's reading experience. Too small a font size may be difficult to read, while too large a font size may take up too much screen space. Therefore, translators need to choose the appropriate font and font size while ensuring that the information is clearly conveyed.

#### 3.2.2 Cultural Restrictions

Cultural differences: Viewers in different countries and regions have different cultural backgrounds and values.<sup>8</sup>In subtitle translation, translators need to fully consider the cultural background of the target audience to avoid cultural misunderstanding or conflict. For example, some metaphors or idioms that are common in the source culture may not be applicable in the target culture and need to be adjusted or replaced appropriately.

Customs and habits: Audiences in different cultures may have different language habits and ways of expression. Translators need to understand the language habits of the target audience to make the subtitle translation closer to the expression of the target language.

#### 3.2.3 Linguistic Limitations

Vocabulary and grammar: There are differences in vocabulary and grammatical structure between different languages. In subtitle translation, the translator needs to understand the meaning of the original text accurately and choose the appropriate vocabulary and grammatical structure of the target language for expression. This requires the translator to have a solid language foundation and rich translation experience.

Spoken and Written: Dialogue in documentaries is usually spoken, and subtitle translation requires the translation of spoken language into written language. This requires the translator to have an in-depth understanding of the differences between spoken and written languages and make appropriate adjustments in the translation process.

#### 3.2.4 Psychological Restrictions

Distraction: When viewers watch a documentary film, their attention may be distracted by a variety of factors. Therefore, subtitle translation needs to be concise and easy to understand so that viewers can get the information quickly.

Information Processing Speed: Viewers have limited processing speed for subtitle information. Excessively long subtitles or complex sentence structures may result in viewers not being able to



understand the information in a timely manner. Therefore, the translator needs to simplify the sentence structure as much as possible to improve the readability of the subtitles while ensuring that the information is accurately conveyed.

#### 4. Subtitle Translation Strategies for the Documentary Film *Earth's Pulse* Under the Guidance of Relevance Theory

##### 4.1 Introduction to *Earth's Pulse*

*Earth's Pulse* is a nature documentary produced by the BBC, directed and narrated by David Attenborough. It premiered in the United Kingdom on 27 February 2006 and is based on the BBC series *Planet Earth*. *Planet Earth* covers virtually all of the planet's ecosystems, from the Antarctic to the Arctic, from the equator to the frigid zone, from the African savannah to the tropical rain forests, to desolate peaks and deep oceans. It presents uncountable creatures in extremely beautiful figures, such as the rise and fall of the Okavango Flood and the survival of the animals that depend on it in its vicinity, the rare and precious images of snow leopards hunting for food amidst the snowy sky, and the harsh scenario of penguins, polar bears, seals and other creatures that rely on each other on the ice sheet. *Earth's Pulse* is a landmark nature documentary which, by showing the various ecological environments and creatures on Earth, gives viewers a deep sense of the wonder and beauty of nature, and at the same time awakens people to the importance of environmental protection on Earth. This documentary has undoubtedly set a new benchmark for the production of subsequent nature documentaries.

##### 4.2 Subtitle translation strategies for the documentary film *Earth's Pulse*

Gutt's theory of associative translation suggests that the criterion for translation should be the same as the criterion for communication, which is to find the best association. Therefore, when translating the subtitles of *Earth's Pulse*, the translator is also using the criterion of finding the best association. Translation activity is a process of two explicit-reasoning processes, and the translator has to assume the role of reasoning in the first explicit-reasoning process and the role of explicit reasoning in the second explicit-reasoning process, which is really a great challenge for the translator. , so how best to put such roles together, that is, to endeavor to seek for best relevance. It is indeed a challenge for the translator to find the best way to perform such a role, that is, to try to find the best connection. The translator should effectively understand the communicative intent of the source language in the first explicit-reasoning process, and through the second explicit process, convey the communicative intent of the source language to the translated audience, so that the translated audience can feel the same or similar communicative intent that the source audience gets when reading the translated subtitles. In this way, the optimal correlation is formed, and the key to forming the optimal correlation is to create

sufficient contextual effects for the translated audience, so that the translated audience can obtain sufficient contextual effects with minimal processing efforts to understand the communicative intent of the source language. According to this guiding principle of association theory, the author also aims to find the best association when translating the subtitles of *Earth Pulse*, and takes into account the associations of semantics, culture, and receivers, and sums up the rules of translating different types of subtitle texts according to the characteristics of the subtitle texts of *Earth's Pulse*.

##### 4.2.1 SUPPLEMENT

The two languages are very different in word structure and grammatical expression, Chinese focuses on meaning and English focuses on form, so the practice of translation from Chinese to English not only ensures semantic accuracy, but also ensures that the translation conforms to the syntactic structure and grammatical norms. English has a rigorous subject-predicate structure, whether it is a simple sentence or a compound sentence, the subject-predicate structure is always the core structure of the English sentence, the lack of the subject-predicate structure of the sentence is incomplete or even does not comply with the grammatical norms, in addition to the subject-predicate structure, the English compound sentence usually requires a rigorous linkage of related words.

In addition to the subject-predicate structure, English compound sentences usually need to be connected by strict correlative words, such as because, although, despite and so on. In English, if there is no linking word to connect the two clauses, the sentence will be difficult to understand and ungrammatical if there is no linking word to connect the two clauses in the tone of expression such as reason or concession. Chinese is very different. Although there is subject-predicate structure in Chinese grammar, it is not the only structure for a sentence to be established. In addition, because of the importance of meaning, many sentences express cause and effect, concessions and other tones, but there is no related words to connect them.

e.g. *Penguins waddle across the ice.*

企鹅们摇摇摆摆地穿过冰面，它们独特的行走方式令人忍俊不禁。

The original subtitle only describes the behavior of the penguins, but by adding "their unique way of walking is so funny that you can't help it", the translation not only enriches the image, but also enhances the audience's love and identification with the penguins, thus improving the relevance of the translation.

##### 4.2.2 Omission

The strategy of abridgment is particularly important in subtitle translation due to its spatiotemporal constraints (Pedersen, 2011). It requires the translator to simplify the sentence structure and delete redundant

information as much as possible without compromising the meaning of the original text. As shown in the example... This does not affect the understanding of the translated audience, but also removes redundant contextual effects, saving them processing effort and effectively achieving optimal correlation (Bogucki, 2009).

e.g. *The Amazon rainforest is home to an incredible diversity of plant and animal species, including many that are endangered.*

亚马逊雨林孕育着丰富的动植物物种，包括许多濒危物种。

In this example, the subtitles are made more concise by deleting the definite articles “incredible diversity of” and “that are endangered”. This does not affect the understanding of the translated audience, but also removes redundant contextual effects, saving them processing effort and effectively achieving optimal correlation.

#### 4.2.3 Explicit

Explicit strategies are mainly used to deal with culturally loaded words such as metaphors and allusions in the original text, so that the target language audience can understand their meaning directly.

e.g. *The polar bear is the king of the Arctic.*

北极熊是北极地区的霸主，它的力量和威严无人能敌。

In this example, by stating “king of the Arctic”, the audience is able to better visualise the position of the polar bear in the Arctic ecosystem.

#### 4.2.4 Substitution

The substitution strategy is mainly used to deal with vocabulary in the original language that is difficult to translate directly, such as jargon and dialect, by replacing it with more commonly used expressions in the target language.

e.g. *The cheetah is a fast runner among cats.*

猎豹是猫科动物中的短跑冠军。

In the original text, “fast runner” was replaced with “sprint champion”, which is a term that is more in line with Chinese expression habits, and can better convey the cheetah's fast speed and improve the relevance of the translation.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study has explored in depth the subtitle translation strategy of the BBC documentary film *Earth Pulse* from the perspective of association theory. Through a detailed analysis of the subtitle translation of the documentary, we are not only able to gain an insight into the important role of subtitle translation in cross-cultural communication, but also further understand the

specific application of association theory in the practice of subtitle translation.

First of all, relevance theory emphasizes that translation is a communicative process involving three parties: the author of the original text, the translator and the target language reader. In the subtitle translation of *Earth's Pulse*, the translator fully considered the cognitive ability and cultural background of the target-language audience, and maximized the optimal relevance between the original text and the translated text through the strategies of addition, deletion, explicitness, substitution and compression. These strategies not only ensure the accurate transmission of subtitle information, but also enhance the audience's understanding and interest in the content of the documentary.

Secondly, subtitle translation, as a special form of translation, has its unique characteristics and requirements. In the subtitle translation of *Earth's Pulse*, the translator needs to quickly and accurately convey the information of the original text within limited time and space, while also considering the layout and visual effect of the subtitles. Therefore, translators need to have a high degree of professionalism and keen cross-cultural awareness to ensure the quality and effect of subtitle translation.

Through the study of the subtitle translation of *Earth's Pulse*, we find that the theory of association provides strong theoretical support and practical guidance for subtitle translation. The principle of “optimal relevance” emphasized by the relevance theory requires translators to take into full consideration the cognitive ability and cultural background of the target language audience in the translation process, and to choose the most appropriate translation strategies and methods. This not only helps to improve the quality and effect of subtitle translation, but also helps to promote cross-cultural communication and cultural exchange.

In conclusion, this study has analyzed and researched the subtitle translation of the BBC documentary *Earth's Pulse* in depth from the perspective of correlation theory. Through this study, we not only have a deeper understanding of subtitle translation, but also provide useful references and lessons for future subtitle translation practice.

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