

A Corpus-Based Study of Modal Verb Translation and Functional Reconstruction in Children's Animated Films from the Perspective of Appraisal Theory

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Abstract

Existing studies on subtitle translation of animated film have mostly focused on language simplification and cultural adaptation, with insufficient attention paid to the systematic shifts and functional motivations of modal verbs—a core resource for expressing emotional attitude during translation. Based on a self-built small-scale English-Chinese bilingual parallel corpus, this study adopts a combined quantitative and qualitative analytical approach, utilizing the Appraisal Theory from Systemic Functional Linguistics as its framework to investigate Chinese translation strategies of modal verbs in animated film subtitles. It aims to reveal systematic differences in the distribution of modal strength between English and Chinese, and to explore how translators functionally reconstruct characters' attitudes and stances through the transformation of modal resources. This research holds academic significance in uncovering the mechanisms of attitudinal meaning transfer in subtitle translation and in promoting interpersonal functional equivalence in children's animated film translation.

Keywords

Subtitle Translation, Modal Verbs, Bilingual Parallel Corpus, Appraisal Theory

1. Introduction

As a crucial conduit for cross-cultural communication, subtitle translation plays an indispensable role in the international dissemination of film and television works. Existing research has predominantly explored its translation principles,

constraints, and communicative efficacy from perspectives such as functional equivalence, domestication and foreignization, or cultural transmission (Li, 2001; Gottlieb, 2004). However, current academic focus largely remains on macro-level strategies and cultural dimensions (Wu & Li, 2024), while the translation of modal verbs—a key linguistic resource in animated film subtitles—has received limited systematic attention. As essential grammatical devices for conveying emotional attitudes, degrees of volition, and speaker stance, the translation of modal verbs directly influences the audience's perception of interpersonal meaning in character dialogues.

To investigate the patterns and functions of modal verb shifts in animated subtitle translation, this study constructs an English-Chinese parallel corpus based on the Oscar-winning animated feature films of four years (2019-2022). Utilizing the Appraisal Theory as the analytical framework, it focuses on examining the Chinese translation strategies of modal verbs and the functional reconstruction they achieve in expressing attitude. The study aims to reveal how translators selectively shift modal verbs during the translation process and how such shifts reshape the interpersonal meaning embedded in dialogues.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Subtitle Translation

Research on the definition and function of subtitle translation predominantly focuses on its technical characteristics and communicative purposes. Scholars generally concur that subtitle translation involves the presentation of oral information in on-screen text, synchronized with the original content, serving as a cross-linguistic interpretation aimed at overcoming language barriers and conveying semantic information (Li, 2001; Gottlieb, 2004). Furthermore, its core characteristics are identified as accessibility for a mass audience, instantaneity, temporal and spatial constraints, and cross-cultural nature.

Western research on subtitle translation began in the 1950s and 1960s, entering a period of prosperity in the 1990s. Landmark publications from this era include *Overcoming Language Barriers in Television: Dubbing and Subtitling for a European Audience* (Luyken et al., 1991) and *Subtitling for the Media: A Handbook of an Art* (Ivarsson, 1992). The international conference “Language Transfer on Screen”, held in London in February 2004, further propelled the diversification of research in this field.

Regarding the development of subtitle translation research in China, scholarly discussion often centers on its evolutionary stages and the construction of local theoretical frameworks. Researchers note that while domestic research started relatively late and initially lacked systematic theory, it has developed rapidly. From the 1980s to the end of the century, studies primarily addressed the necessity, strategies, and principles of subtitle translation (Ma, 1997). Since the turn of the 21st century, the scope has gradually expanded to include explorations of strategies and norms (Li, 2001; Li & Bo, 2005). Recent scholarly work

has increasingly concentrated on the practice of subtitle translation in the international dissemination of traditional Chinese culture, such as the English translation strategies for cultural elements in operas and films (Zhang, 2022; Lu & Zhu, 2023).

Concerning the importance of subtitle translation and the relative lack of academic attention it receives, discussions frequently highlight the disparity between its significant social impact and the current state of research. Scholars point out that while subtitle translation plays a crucial role in fostering cross-cultural understanding and mass communication (Cintas & Remael, 2007), the academic focus it commands falls considerably short of its actual audience reach and societal demand (Qian, 2000). Consequently, there is a growing consensus within the academic community on the necessity to strengthen systematic research, curriculum development, and academic publication in this area.

2.2. Modal Verbs

As a core topic in linguistics, research on the theoretical origins and classification of modal verbs often focuses on their philosophical and logical foundations, as well as their systematic construction within linguistics. Scholars generally concur that modality originates from the exploration of modal logic in philosophy (e.g., Aristotle) and was systematically categorized by Von Wright (1951) into alethic, epistemic, deontic, and existential modalities, laying the groundwork for linguistic classification. Furthermore, research often concentrates on establishing a framework of semantic typology. Lyons (1977) distinguished modality into epistemic and deontic types; Palmer (1979, 1986) further contributed by adding dynamic modality, thereby refining the typological system. Sweetser (1990), from a cognitive perspective, proposed that epistemic modality is a metaphorical extension of root modality, offering a unified explanation for polysemy.

Regarding the grammaticalization and typological characteristics of Chinese modal verbs, research predominantly focuses on diachronic evolution and English-Chinese contrastive analysis. Scholars maintain that Chinese modal verbs have undergone a process of grammaticalization from full verbs to modal elements (Li, 2008). Typologically, they exhibit strong contextual dependence and weak morphological marking (Peng, 2007).

In studies concerning the second language acquisition and cross-linguistic comparison of modal verbs, the focus is often on the differences between learners and native speakers, as well as their cognitive motivations. For instance, Hou Fang (2022), through corpus-based comparison, identified disparities between Chinese learners and native speakers in the frequency, tense usage, and semantic understanding of modal verbs, interpreting these findings from the perspectives of conceptual transfer and cognitive models. Song Wenhui et al. (2025) investigated the polarity characteristics of Chinese modal expressions, analyzing their distributional constraints in affirmative and negative contexts from a functional motivation standpoint and conducting cross-linguistic comparisons.

2.3. Appraisal Theory

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), founded by M.A.K. Halliday, posits language as a social semiotic, emphasizing its role in realizing three meta-functions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. In expanding research on the interpersonal function, James R. Martin and colleagues proposed Appraisal Theory in the 1990s. This theory systematically elucidates how language users employ lexico-grammatical resources to express attitudes, negotiate stances, and construct interpersonal meanings (Martin & White, 2005). It filled a gap in SFL concerning evaluative meaning and has become an indispensable analytical tool in discourse analysis, undergoing a notable process of introduction, application, and refinement within Chinese academia.

The Appraisal Theory framework comprises three interacting subsystems: attitude, engagement, and graduation. The attitude system is central, further subdivided into affect, judgment, and appreciation, which respectively express emotional reactions, assess character and behavior, and evaluate the value of things (Martin & Rose, 2003). The engagement system concerns the sources of voices and the negotiation of dialogic space, involving resources such as modality, projection, and concession. The graduation system adjusts the intensity of attitudes and the precision of categorical boundaries, forming a network of meaning potential (Martin & White, 2005).

According to a visual analysis by Hu Xiao (2022) based on CSSCI journal articles, Appraisal Theory constitutes one of the most active and enduring research hotspots within Chinese SFL studies, ranking prominently in the scale of keyword clustering. Research in this area exhibits a clear trajectory from theoretical exposition towards diversified applied studies. At the application level, Appraisal Theory provides robust explanatory power for analyzing various discourse types. For instance, Li Chengchen and Jiang Guiying (2017) employed the Attitude system to compare Chinese and English prefaces in academic monographs, finding no significant macro-level differences in attitude resource distribution but significant disparities in realization patterns, profoundly revealing how linguistic features and genre conventions jointly constrain the selection of evaluative resources.

In the realm of literary text analysis, Appraisal Theory effectively unveils the complex emotional world and value stances of authors. Zhao Yuqing (2025), analyzing the affective resources in Sylvia Plath's poem—Tulips, found that the poet employed dense negative affect resources to express self-denial and weariness with life's burdens. Simultaneously, contradictory judgments and appreciations of the "tulips"—both repulsive and desirable—reflected a complex engagement with vitality. Similarly, Nie Yao (2015) applied the theory to emotional analysis in literary works, demonstrating its potential for uncovering deep-seated emotions and ideologies in literary texts.

Furthermore, Appraisal Theory is widely applied in translation studies and discourse analysis. In translation, Zhang Xiangang (2007) explored its implications for discourse translation. Si Xianzhu (2011) argued from a holistic SFL perspective for its value in innovating translation research paradigms. In discourse analysis,

its scope encompasses news reporting (Li & Sun, 2007), political speeches (Wen, 2017), and business discourse (Xu & Xia, 2013). In recent years, the integration of Appraisal Theory with Ecolinguistics has been particularly noteworthy. Li Shujing and Liu Chengyu (2020) analyzed Trump's speech on withdrawing from the Paris Agreement based on the Appraisal system, while Huang Guowen (2016, 2017) leveraged it to advance "Harmonious Discourse Analysis", aimed at promoting harmony, demonstrating the theory's robust interdisciplinary vitality.

Despite the fruitful application of Appraisal Theory across multiple discourse analysis domains, its utilization in film and television translation research remains notably insufficient. Li Chengchen and Jiang Guiying (2017) point out that existing studies predominantly focus on identifying attitude resources at the lexical level, while paying inadequate attention to the construction of evaluative meaning at the grammatical stratum. This limitation is particularly pronounced in film subtitle translation research—specifically, how modal verbs, as core grammatical resources for realizing the Attitude, Engagement and Graduation systems, reconstruct character stance and modulate emotional intensity during cross-linguistic transfer has yet to be systematically investigated.

3. Research Methodology and Corpus Construction

This study constructs a research framework integrating quantitative and qualitative analysis, aiming to systematically investigate the mechanisms by which modal verbs, as attitudinal resources, are shifted and reconstructed in animated film subtitle translation. Focusing on the subtitles of four Oscar-winning animated feature films, an English-Chinese bilingual parallel corpus totaling 271,818 characters is constructed. Based on the classification criteria for modal systems proposed by Halliday (2010) and Jiang Ting and Yang Bingjun (2013), modal verbs in both English and Chinese within the corpus are first identified, annotated, and statistically analyzed according to three value levels—high, median, and low. This process captures their distributional characteristics and overall differences at a macro level, establishing a foundation for quantitative comparison. Subsequently, within the specific contexts of film dialogues, an in-depth analysis is conducted to examine the engagement functions realized by the source-text modal verbs and the attitudinal intensity they embody, revealing the crucial role of modal choices in constructing character stance and dialogic space. Finally, through systematic comparison between source text and target text, the strategies employed by translators in handling modal verbs—such as value raising, value lowering, or type shifts—are identified. The study delves into how such strategic shifts reshape characters' attitudinal stances and the interpersonal meaning of dialogues, ultimately revealing how subtitle translation reconstructs and transmits evaluative meaning in cross-linguistic interaction.

3.1. Corpus Construction

Originating in the 1960s, the volume *Corpus Translation Studies* defines a corpus

as an electronic database composed of natural language materials collected according to specific sampling techniques. It is a collection of language application materials systematically selected and organized based on research purposes and corpus selection methods (Hu, 2018: p. 109). Three types of corpora are commonly used in translation studies: translational corpora, analogical corpora, and parallel corpora (Lyu, 2015). A bilingual parallel corpus is a type of corpus that enables full-text retrieval through comparison between source texts and target texts.

This study adheres to the norms of corpus linguistics in systematically constructing an English-Chinese bilingual parallel corpus. It selects the English and Chinese subtitles of four Oscar-winning animated feature films, including *Toy Story 4* (2019), *Soul* (2020), *Encanto* (2021), and *Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio* (2022). The selection criteria are as follows: First, the four films are highly representative in terms of narrative structure, dialogue density, and emotional expression. Second, the dialogues in these films contain a rich variety of modal verbs, which facilitates the investigation of translation shifts across different types of modal meanings. Third, all of the above-mentioned films are equipped with official Chinese subtitles, ensuring high accessibility and processability of the corpus data.

Subtitle texts were retrieved and downloaded from the SubHD subtitle resource platform. English subtitles were preferentially selected from embedded English subtitle files exported from official streaming versions; Chinese subtitles were preferentially taken from the official studio-translated versions. To avoid formatting interference, only independent .srt English subtitle files and independent .srt Chinese subtitle files were downloaded, while embedded bilingual ASS or subtitle formats containing special effect tags were excluded. After downloading, the subtitle files were uniformly cleaned by removing timecode tags (e.g., 00:01:23,456 → 00:01:25,789), comment lines, and non-dialogue text (e.g., end-credit song lyrics, production credits, scene descriptions), retaining only the pure dialogue content. Then, they were converted into standardized TXT files. Subsequently, CorpusWordParser and UCREL CLAWS were respectively employed for word segmentation and tagging of the Chinese and English corpora. Following this, ABBYY Aligner was used for sentence alignment between the Chinese and English texts. Upon completion of the corpus construction, AntConc and WordSmith were utilized to extract core statistical indicators—including word frequency, type/token ratio (TTR), standardized type/token ratio (STTR), lexical density, and average sentence length—providing reliable data support for subsequent comparative analysis.

3.2. Classification and Statistics of Modal Verbs

Modal verbs are a category of verbs that express the speaker's viewpoint or subjective prediction. Halliday (2010) categorizes the modal system into three values—high, median, and low—based on the value of modality, classifying must, ought to, need, has to, and is to as high-value modal verbs; will, would, shall, and

should as median-value modal verbs; and may, might, can, and could as low-value modal verbs. Similarly, Jiang Ting and Yang Bingjun (2013) as well as Xu Ying (2018) have conducted corresponding classifications and value assignments for Chinese modal verbs. Accordingly, “应该” “要” “必须” are categorized as high-value modal verbs; “大概” “将” “会” “想” belong to the median-value category; while “可能” “也许” “愿意” “可以” are classified as low-value modal verbs.

On the basis of automatic part-of-speech tagging, all candidate words annotated as modal verbs were manually reviewed by the researchers. For English, the modal verbs were included according to the classification criteria proposed by Halliday; for Chinese, the corresponding modal verbs were included following the criteria established by Jiang Ting and Yang Bingjun. For polysemous words such as “会” and “想”, only their usages expressing modal meanings were retained, while their lexical (non-modal) usages were excluded. The results of the statistical and comparative analysis of modal verb usage in the selected children’s animated film subtitles are listed in **Table 1** and **Table 2**:

Table 1. Statistical table of modal verbs in translated subtitles (Target Text).

Modal Verb	应该	必须	要	大概	会	将	想	可能	也许	愿意	可以
Frequency	18	27	71	3	66	8	26	17	19	6	52
Percentage (%)	5.75	8.63	22.68	0.96	21.09	2.26	8.31	5.43	6.07	1.92	16.61

Table 2. Statistical table of modal verbs in original subtitles (Source Text).

Modal Verb	must	ought to	need	has to	is to	shall	should	will	would	can	could	may	might
Frequency	28	1	70	5	3	7	29	121	56	295	58	17	11
Percentage (%)	3.99	0.14	9.99	0.71	0.43	0.99	4.14	17.26	7.99	42.08	8.27	2.43	1.57

4. Comparative Analysis of Modal Verb Usage and Its Translation

4.1. Comparative Analysis of Modal Verb Usage

The unit of analysis in this study is each individual modal verb occurring in a single sentence. A total of 1014 valid cases of modal verbs were identified from the source and target texts (701 cases from the source text and 313 cases from the target text). Since the variables consist of modal value (high/median/low) and language (English/Chinese), which form a contingency table, the Chi-square test is applicable, and no normality test is required.

To investigate the systematic differences in the use of modal verb values between the English source texts and the Chinese target texts, a Chi-Square test was conducted. **Table 3** clearly illustrates the distribution characteristics of both. The use of modal verbs in the English source texts exhibits a pronounced “low-value dominant” pattern, with low-value modals accounting for as much as 54.35% (381/701) of the total. In contrast, while the total number of modal verbs in the

Chinese target texts is significantly reduced, their distribution structure has undergone a marked transformation, displaying a tendency to shift towards high-value modals. High-value modal verbs constitute 37.06% (116/313) of the total in the target texts, surpassing the proportion of low-value modals.

The results of the Chi-Square test in **Table 4** confirm that the difference in the value-level distribution of modal verbs between the source and target texts is highly statistically significant ($\chi^2(2) = 74.506, p < 0.001$). As all cells have expected counts greater than 5, and the minimum expected count is 68.84, the test result is valid and reliable. To further assess the practical significance of this difference, the effect size Cramer's V was calculated, yielding a value of approximately 0.271. According to **Cohen's (1988)** criteria, this effect size is considered medium. This finding indicates that subtitle translators do not perform equivalent conversion of modal verbs during the translation process; rather, they engage in a systematic and practically significant reconstruction.

Table 3. Statistics of modal verbs by value level.

Value Level	High	Median	Low	Total
Source Text (English)	107	213	381	701
Target Text (Chinese)	116	103	94	313

Table 4. Chi-square test.

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	74.506 ^a	2	0.000
Likelihood Ratio	73.042	2	0.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	73.368	1	0.000
N of Valid Cases	1014		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 68.84.

4.2. Translation of Modal Verbs

Thompson (2004) posits that modal value reflects the speaker's degree of certainty regarding the truth or validity of a proposition or proposal. **Zhang Jianshe and Wu Xi (2004)** point out that different choices of modal values will affect the degree of politeness in speech acts: the lower the modal value, the higher the degree of politeness, and vice versa. In various linguistic contexts, differences in speaker status and language use can create specific discursive advantages, with modality serving as a crucial grammatical means to realize such advantages (**Wang, 2004**). Therefore, different modal values not only indicate the speaker's level of confidence in the utterance or the degree of pressure exerted by a proposal, but also reflect the strength of the speaker's tone, their social status, and the nature of their discursive power (**Hu & Ji, 2024**). The higher the modal value, the more certain the speaker is about the proposition and the more weight their words carry; con-

versely, the lower the value, the weaker the certainty and the more tentative or uncertain the utterance appears (Xu, 2023). To delve deeper into how the macro-level trends identified above manifest in specific contexts, this study selects representative translation examples to analyze, from the perspective of Appraisal Theory, how translators reconstruct character stance through the shifting of modal verbs.

The following seven examples are all representative cases of recurrent corpus patterns, rather than isolated or idiosyncratic instances. As shown in **Table 3** & **Table 4**, the quantitative analysis of the self-built parallel corpus reveals systematic differences in modal value distribution between the source and target texts ($\chi^2(2) = 74.506, p < 0.001$). Specifically, low-value modals account for 54.35% of the English source text but only 30.03% of the Chinese target text, while high-value modals increase from 15.26% to 37.06% (see **Table 3**). Against this quantitative backdrop, Examples 1 - 2 illustrate the recurrent retention of low-value modals, Examples 3 - 4 exemplify the systematic upgrading of median/high-value modals, and Examples 5 - 7 demonstrate the recurrent intensification of negative-modal constructions. All seven cases represent observed corpus-wide tendencies, not isolated selections.

4.2.1. Translation of Low-Value Modal Verbs: Retention and Reinforcement of Uncertainty

The core connotation of modal value lies in the speaker's judgment of the truth value of a proposition, or the degree of pressure exerted by a proposition or command on the listener (Li & Hu, 2013). Consequently, the abundance of low-value modal verbs in English source texts plays a pivotal role in constructing the negotiable and open nature of character dialogues. During the translation process, translators must seek corresponding means in Chinese to preserve this characteristic of uncertainty.

Example 1:

Source Text: What if I can't do this?

Target Text: 要是我做不到怎么办?

In *Soul* (2020), the protagonist Joe has just unexpectedly died and finds himself in a surreal realm before his soul is set to enter the afterlife. Panicking and expressing fear about not being able to return to his body in time for his long-awaited jazz performance, he asks himself: "What if I can't do this?" The low-value modal verb "can't" works in conjunction with the hypothetical structure "What if" to construct a dialogic space imbued with self-doubt.

From the perspective of Appraisal Theory, "can't", as a low-value modal verb, opens up a space for negotiation (Xu, 2023), while the hypothetical "What if" structure further amplifies the uncertainty. Together, they construct a psychological field characterized by the character's anxiety and confusion. The target text employs "做不到" to render "can't", accurately conveying the semantics of incapability, while the interrogative form "怎么办" preserves the tentative tone of the

original. This choice retains the engagement function of the low-value modal verb. The composite structure “做不到+怎么办” preserves both the sense of incapability and the tentative concern about the unknown, thus maintaining the open dialogic space of the original. From the perspective of the graduation system, “做不到” keeps the original modal value, avoiding weakening of uncertainty or over-intensification of negative meaning, and therefore achieves a closer formal and functional correspondence. It allows the target audience to experience emotions akin to those of the source audience.

Example 2:

Source Text: Maybe we could try another way.

Target Text: 也许我们可以试试别的方法。

In *Encanto* (2021), the protagonist Mirabel Madrigal is trying to convince her skeptical sister Isabela to consider a different approach to saving their family’s magical house. Speaking in a gentle, suggestive tone to avoid conflict and maintain cooperation, she says: “Maybe we could try another way”.

Here, “could”, as a low-value modal verb, constructs a dialogic context rich in negotiability in the source text. From the perspective of Appraisal Theory’s engagement system, “could” does not express definite ability or willingness. Instead, by lowering the modal value, it conveys a tentative, suggestive tone, reserving ample room for maneuver between the dialogue participants. This expression demonstrates the speaker’s cautious attitude while providing the listener with the possibility of refusal or modification. According to Ren & Feng (2014), low-value modal verbs express the speaker’s weaker judgment and less discursive power, tending to construct the speaker as a member of the collective rather than foregrounding personal status. As Zheng (2009) further notes, lower-status individuals tend to use low-value modals, while higher-status individuals tend to use high-value modals. In the Madrigal family hierarchy, Mirabel’s use of “could” is thus consistent with her relatively lower position.

The translator’s choice of the low-value modal verb “可以” accurately captures the original’s modal value. It avoids over-intensifying it into high-value modals like “应该” or “必须”, thus preventing the suggestion from becoming a directive. This precise correspondence fully preserves the open and negotiable nature of the original dialogue. From the perspective of the attitude system, this translation retains the original mode of engagement, and the interpersonal meaning constructed in the target text is functionally analogous to that of the source text. Through precise control of the modal value, the translator conveys both the substantive content of the suggestion and retains the negotiable space of the dialogue, ensuring an authentic representation of the character relationship and an accurate transmission of the conversational atmosphere.

4.2.2. Translation of Median and High-Value Modal Verbs: Manifestation of Obligation and Determination

In translation practice, translators often enhance the modal value to intensify a

character's sense of obligation and determination. This strategy is particularly evident when constructing a character's authoritative image or expressing a firm stance.

Example 3:

Source Text: We need to save Buzz.

Target Text: 我们必须救巴斯光年。

In *Toy Story 4* (2019), Woody discovers that their friend is in immediate danger. Speaking with urgency and determination, Woody emphasizes that action is necessary without question: "We need to save Buzz".

In this example, the source text employs the high-value modal verb "need to" to express a necessity grounded in objective needs, reflecting the character's cognitive judgment regarding the necessity of the action. Correspondingly, the translator selects the high-value Chinese modal verb "必须" as the equivalent. Viewed through the lens of Appraisal Theory's graduation system, "必须", as a high-value modal verb expressing obligation in Chinese, carries a semantic intensity that significantly surpasses that of "need to". Specifically, "need to" within the English modal system still retains a certain space for negotiation, implying that while the action is deemed necessary, some room for discussion remains. In contrast, "必须" completely closes off the dialogic openness, transforming the judgment-based "need" into an unquestionable "imperative".

According to Zhao Qiurong et al. (2020), high-value modal verbs often signal the speaker's strong and resolute tone, and may also reflect certain power relations. Low-value modal verbs, in contrast, tend to soften the tone, making the utterance more indirect and polite. In this case, the shift from "need to" to "必须" raises the modal value, thereby enhancing the speaker's discursive authority and tone strength. Within the specific crisis context of *Toy Story 4*, where an urgent rescue requires a firm stance, this intensification projects a more decisive and authoritative tone.

Example 4:

Source Text: You should believe in yourself.

Target Text: 你必须相信自己。

In *Soul* (2020), the famous jazz musician Dorothea Williams is giving final words of encouragement to Joe after his successful performance. Her tone is firm and inspirational, pushing him to fully embrace his worth as a musician. She tells him: "You should believe in yourself".

The source text's "should", a prototypical median-value modal verb, constructs an advisory type of engagement. Its essence lies in offering a possibility rather than imposing a mandatory requirement. This expression reserves ample choice for the listener, reflecting the respect for individual autonomy prevalent in English-speaking cultures. However, the target text's choice of "必须", a high-value modal verb in Chinese, fundamentally alters this engagement type, constructing a commanding form of engagement that almost entirely closes down the possibility for

dialogic negotiation.

Examining this through Appraisal Theory, the shift in engagement from “advice” to “command” alters the interpersonal meaning of the utterance. According to Thompson (2004), modal value reflects the speaker’s degree of certainty regarding a proposition. In the source text, the median-value modal “should” constructs an advisory tone, leaving the listener a degree of choice. In the target text, however, the high-value modal “必须” expresses a much higher degree of certainty, effectively closing the negotiable space. Furthermore, as Hu Yujing and Ji Aimei (2024) argue, different modal values also reflect the strength of the speaker’s tone and the nature of their discursive power. Within the specific context of *Soul*, the speaker Dorothea Williams is a respected jazz musician and a figure of authority. The translator’s choice of “必须” raises the modal value and thereby heightens the discursive power of the character’s utterance. Rather than merely offering advice, the target text constructs a commanding tone that aligns with the dramatic weight of the moment—a pivotal scene where the protagonist receives final encouragement after a successful performance.

4.2.3. Comprehensive Translation of Negative Structures and Modality: Clarification of Stance

The combination of negative structures with modal verbs produces a particular effect in constructing a character’s definitive stance. The translator’s approach to handling such structures often directly impacts the conveyance of character attitude.

Example 5:

Source Text: I’m not going to Earth. I don’t want a life.

Target Text: 我不会去地球。我不想要生命。

In *Soul* (2020), the protagonist Joe Gardner, after his accidental death, finds himself in “The Great Before”, where he is mistakenly assigned as a mentor to the cynical soul 22, who has refused to go to Earth for thousands of years. When Joe tries to help 22 find her “Spark” to obtain an Earth Pass, 22 firmly declares her rejection of earthly life: “I’m not going to Earth. I don’t want a life”.

This translation example demonstrates the complex handling of negative structures combined with modal expressions. The source text employs a double negative structure through the negative form of the present continuous tense “am not going to” and the negation of the lexical verb “don’t want”, constructing a strong sense of refusal from both temporal and volitional dimensions. According to Palmer (1979), modal verbs can express the speaker’s judgment on the truth of a proposition and indicate ability or willingness. In the Chinese translation “不会”, the modal verb “会” combined with negation does more than simply negate a future action. It encodes the speaker’s subjective judgment that the proposition “going to Earth” is not true or not possible. Furthermore, “不会” also implies the speaker’s unwillingness, which is made explicit by the parallel structure “不想要”.

Modal verbs convey modal meanings such as demand, request, command, and

other emotions, attitudes, and tones (Zhang, 2013). In this case, “不会” does not express a neutral prediction; rather, it conveys a strong attitude of refusal and a definitive tone of rejection. The combination of the modal “会” with negation in “不会” produces a more forceful subjective stance than a non-modal negation such as “不去”. This choice intensifies the character’s tone, transforming a mere statement about future action into an emphatic declaration of unwillingness.

From the perspective of Appraisal Theory, the negative-modal construction “不会” maintains the original’s high intensity of refusal while adding a subjective-predictive layer that further closes the dialogic space. Within the narrative context of *Soul*, the character 22 has refused to go to Earth for thousands of years. The intensified negative-modal expression in the Chinese subtitle thus reconstructs the character’s long-established, unwavering stance of rejection through target-language modal resources.

Example 6:

Source Text: You mustn’t tell anyone about this.

Target Text: 你绝不能告诉任何人。

In *Guillermo del Toro’s Pinocchio* (2022), the father figure Geppetto warns Pinocchio in a serious, protective tone not to reveal a dangerous secret to outsiders. The command is absolute, given the high stakes in a wartime setting. He says to Pinocchio: “You mustn’t tell anyone about this”.

In this example, the source text employs “mustn’t” to express a strong prohibition; this high-value modal verb itself conveys an unquestionable binding force. However, the target text constructs an even stronger sense of prohibition than the original by combining the intensifying adverb “绝” with the modal verb “不能”. According to Liu Xihua (2025), the adverb “绝” in modern Chinese functions as a modal adverb of certainty. Such adverbs serve to express the speaker’s strong conviction, emphatic tone, and high degree of certainty regarding the proposition. When “绝” is combined with the negative modal “不能”, it does not merely add semantic emphasis; rather, it raises the overall modal value of the utterance to an extreme level.

Viewed through Appraisal Theory’s graduation system, “绝”, as an adverb signifying extremity, elevates the modal value to its highest degree, completely closing off any potential space for negotiation. Compared with the deontic prohibition expressed by “mustn’t” in the source text, the target text’s “绝不能” creates a more absolute prohibitive effect through a dual intensification mechanism: the inherent negation of “不能” is further strengthened by the modal adverb “绝”. In the wartime context of *Guillermo del Toro’s Pinocchio*, this reconstruction effectively foregrounds the father’s authoritative stance and the gravity of his command.

Example 7:

Source Text: Couldn’t we just leave now?

Target Text: 我们就不能现在离开吗?

In *Encanto* (2021), the protagonist Mirabel Madrigal, frustrated by her family’s

rigid expectations, suggests leaving a tense gathering early. Her tone is questioning and tentative, hoping to avoid direct confrontation. She asks: “Couldn’t we just leave now?”

In this example, the source text constructs a highly negotiable dialogic posture through the negative interrogative form “Couldn’t we...”. This sentence pattern in English, through its unique combination of a negative particle and a modal verb, conveys the substantive content of a suggestion while simultaneously preserving ample space for refusal through its interrogative form. According to Fang Ying (2021), low-value modal verbs and rhetorical questions serve to expand dialogic space by providing a non-confrontational environment for negotiation. The low-value modal “could” here exemplifies such an entertain strategy, expanding rather than contracting the dialogic space. The translator selects the corresponding structure “就不能...吗”. The negative-modal combination “就不能” maintains the negative meaning of the original, while the sentence-final modal particle “吗” signals an interrogative, consultative tone. As Yang Shu (2025) notes, modal verbs in Chinese can appear in “吗”—interrogatives and become the focus of the question; the use of “吗” here preserves the tentative, negotiable nature of the original utterance.

From the perspective of Appraisal Theory’s engagement system, the negative-modal-interrogative structure in Chinese preserves the original’s open dialogic space. The utterance remains a suggestion rather than a command, and the listener is still afforded the possibility of refusal. Within the narrative context of *Encanto*, Mirabel is trying to avoid direct confrontation with her sister. The translated line “我们就不能现在离开吗” reconstructs the character’s cautious, hedging communicative posture without intensifying the suggestion into an explicit demand or weakening it into a vague expression.

5. Conclusion

This study, grounded in the Appraisal Theory framework within Systemic Functional Linguistics, conducted a systematic quantitative and qualitative analysis of the translation of modal verbs in children’s animated film subtitles through a self-built English-Chinese bilingual parallel corpus. The research findings indicate that the translation of modal verbs is far from a simple formal correspondence; rather, it is a dynamic process of reconstruction that deeply integrates contextual features, interpersonal functions, and pragmatic intentions. Specifically, the quantitative analysis reveals systematic differences in the value-level distribution between English and Chinese modal verbs. The English source texts exhibit a pronounced “low-value dominant” tendency, emphasizing possibility and negotiability, while the Chinese target texts demonstrate a trend of “high-value shift”, focusing more on the expression of obligation and determination. The results of the Chi-Square test ($\chi^2(2) = 74.506, p < 0.001$) and the medium effect size (Cramer’s $V \approx 0.271$) confirm that this difference is both statistically significant and practically meaningful, reflecting the systematic reconstruction undertaken by transla-

tors during the translation process.

At the micro level, case analysis further demonstrates that translators employ various strategies to achieve functional transformation of modal resources. When handling low-value modal verbs, translators tend to preserve or reinforce their characteristic of uncertainty to reproduce the characters' psychological hesitation and the openness of the dialogue. In translating median and high-value modal verbs, they often intensify the modal value and shift the mode of engagement, transforming advisory tones into imperative expressions to highlight the characters' sense of responsibility and psychological determination. Furthermore, the combined use of negative structures and modal verbs is also employed in cross-linguistic transfer to further clarify character stance and enhance the explicitness of attitude.

In conclusion, this study confirms from the perspective of Appraisal Theory that modal verbs, as core grammatical resources for constructing interpersonal meaning, have their translation in subtitles directly impacting the cross-cultural transmission of character psychology and the audience's emotional identification. When undertaking modal shifts, translators must not only consider the inherent differences between the English and Chinese linguistic systems but also fully account for the trajectory of character psychological development and changes in emotional intensity within animated narratives, thereby seeking an effective balance between "semantic equivalence" and "functional reconstruction". Future research could expand to explore the synergistic construction of modality in multimodal contexts, or integrate audience reception experiments to delve deeper into the actual impact of different modal strategies on the psychological cognition and emotional experience of child audiences, thus providing more targeted theoretical references and practical guidance for the practice of animated film and television translation.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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