

A Study on Film Subtitle Translation from the Perspective of Translation Schema Theory

—Taking the Film Green Book as an Example

Tengfei Cheng

School of Foreign Languages, Henan Polytechnic University, Jiaozuo, China

Email: 2993363097@qq.com

How to cite this paper: Cheng, T. F. (2026). A Study on Film Subtitle Translation from the Perspective of Translation Schema Theory. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 14, 397-405. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2026.148023>

Received: July 21, 2026

Accepted: August 16, 2026

Published: August 19, 2026

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Abstract

Audiovisual works are important vehicles for cultural dissemination, and the quality of subtitle translation directly affects the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication. Framed within translation schema theory, this paper analyzes the cognitive transformation process in the subtitle translation of the film *Green Book* from four dimensions: language schema, context schema, cultural schema, and stylistic schema. The study finds that the Italian-American protagonist Tony Vallelonga's colloquial expressions with strong regional color, the African-American pianist Don Shirley's elegant and formal linguistic style, and the culture-loaded words in their dialogues constitute complex translation schema scenarios. Translators need to flexibly adopt strategies such as literal translation, free translation, established-equivalent translation, and functional substitution according to different situations of schema overlap, schema conflict, and schema default, so as to balance information transmission and audiovisual appeal within limited time and space.

Keywords

Translation Schema Theory, Subtitle Translation, *Green Book*

1. Introduction

Audiovisual works are important media for cross-cultural communication, and subtitle translation serves as a crucial bridge connecting heterogeneous cultures. With the acceleration of globalization, a large number of English-language films and TV series have entered the Chinese market. The quality of Chinese subtitle translation directly affects the audience's understanding of the plot and the depth of their cultural cognition.

Green Book (2018) is an Oscar-winning film that tells the story of the interracial friendship forged between Italian-American bouncer Tony Vallelonga and African-American pianist Don Shirley during their concert tour in the American South in 1962. The dialogues in the film feature distinctive temporal and regional characteristics: Tony uses a large number of Italian-American community slang, profanity, and colloquial expressions, while Shirley speaks in standard English with elegance and detachment. The clash between their linguistic styles creates a rich translation schema scenario.

Translation schema theory originates from cognitive psychology and has now been widely applied in translation practice research. Liu and Liu (2004) divided schemas in translation into four categories—language schema, context schema, cultural schema, and stylistic schema—providing a systematic cognitive framework for analyzing cross-cultural translation. Based on this theory, and drawing on examples from the subtitle translation of Green Book, this paper explores translation strategy choices under different schema types. The illustrative examples in this paper are all typical cases manually selected by the author from the film's subtitles, based on the four major categories of translation schema theory. They are intended solely for the purpose of visually demonstrating the applicability of schema theory to the four corresponding translation strategies.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Schema Concept and Classification

The concept of “schema” was first proposed by the German philosopher Kant and later systematically developed by the British psychologist F. C. Bartlett. It refers to the cognitive framework and knowledge system formed in the human mind based on past experience. In translation studies, schemas are the cognitive structures—linguistic, cultural, customary, etc.—that translators and target-language readers possess. Translation is essentially a cognitive transformation process in which the translator activates his/her own schemas, evokes the audience's schemas, and effectively conveys the meaning of the source text. The main argument of schema theory is that when people understand new things, they need to connect the new with known concepts and past experiences—that is, background knowledge (Xue, 2006).

Liu and Liu (2004) categorized schemas in translation into four types. Language schema refers to knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and idiomatic usage, serving as the basic prerequisite for translation. Context schema refers to the environment of language use, including logical connections between discourse components and subjective/objective contextual factors. Stylistic schema refers to the stylistic features of a text, such as differences between spoken and written language, and between formal and informal registers. Cultural schema refers to knowledge structures about culture—culturally organized patterns of cognition formed through prior human experience.

Film subtitle translation differs from written text translation in that it is subject

to temporal and spatial constraints (usually no more than two lines and brief display time), audiovisual synchrony, and colloquial characteristics, which demand higher immediate activation and conversion of schemas. Translators must not only accurately understand the source-line dialogue but also construct comprehensible cognitive schemas for Chinese audiences within a limited timeframe.

2.2. Schema Operation in Subtitle Translation

Carrell (1983) pointed out: “For learners of English as a second language, they must possess a certain level of linguistic competence to activate relevant schemas; even if they have rich content schemas stored in their minds, insufficient linguistic ability will lead to communication failure. The prerequisite for correct translation is that the translator has a good language schema; a lack of understanding of vocabulary knowledge and syntactic structures can cause comprehension errors. Therefore, a good language schema is the precondition for the translator to correctly decode and encode English subtitles.”

Film dialogues carry the social identities, cultural backgrounds, and emotional states of characters. In *Green Book*, the linguistic differences between Tony and Shirley are themselves a microcosm of racial, class, and cultural conflicts. Translators need to recognize the multiple layers of schemas behind the lines: Tony’s Italian-American English involves cultural schemas of dialectal accents and slang; Shirley’s classical English involves language schemas of elite educational contexts; and the frequent racial epithets, food descriptions, and travel encounters in the film involve historical and cultural schemas of the American South in the 1960s.

From the perspective of cross-cultural translation, the schema relationship between the source language and the target language can be divided into three situations: schema overlap (Chinese and Western audiences share the same cognitive schema), schema conflict (the cognitive schemas of the two sides differ significantly or are misaligned), and schema default (the target audience lacks the corresponding cognitive schema) (Liu, 2003). These three situations correspond to differentiated strategies: in schema overlap, literal translation is used to activate shared cognition; in schema conflict, free translation is needed to reconcile the mismatch between surface and deeper meanings; in schema default, a functionally equivalent cognitive framework must be reconstructed in the target language—in practice, due to temporal and spatial constraints in subtitle translation, translators usually adopt established-equivalent translation (borrowing existing expression frameworks from the target language) or functional substitution (replacing source-language symbols with ready-made target-language cultural symbols), while genuine “creation from scratch” is extremely rare.

3. Handling of Different Schemas in the Subtitle Translation of *Green Book*

3.1. Handling of Language Schema and Stylistic Schema

Language schema is the technical prerequisite for the translator’s correct decoding

and encoding, ensuring accuracy and fluency in information transmission; stylistic schema, on the other hand, is the aesthetic guarantee for achieving functional equivalence in the target text, ensuring that characters' personalities, period atmosphere, and emotional tones are effectively preserved in cross-cultural communication. The two complement each other and together constitute an indispensable cognitive tool for translators in handling film subtitles.

Example 1:

Source: "we agreed on a hundred and twenty-five a week, plus expenses. That's our deal."

Target: "我们说好了的, 一周 125 美元, 加上花销, 我们说好的, 对吧? "

Analysis: Tony's language is colloquial, repetitive, and loosely structured. In the source, "a hundred and twenty-five" is translated as "125 美元" in the subtitle, reflecting the consistency of literal translation for numerical information under language schema. However, Tony's repeated emphasis "That's our deal" (translated as "我们说好的, 对吧? ") is a manifestation of his communicative style; the translator retains this colloquial repetition, conveying the character's stubborn and straightforward personality. From the stylistic schema perspective, subtitle translation needs to maintain the informal features of spoken language and avoid over-literariness, which aligns with the audience's expectation schemas for film dialogue.

Example 2:

Source: "I ain't lugging no iron, Dee."

Target: "我才不带熨斗, 小德。"

Analysis: Tony's lines feature a typical non-standard negative concord construction, where two negative markers—ain't and no—appear together in the same clause. In standard English grammar, double negation follows logical rules, with the two negatives canceling each other out to yield a positive meaning. Negative concord, however, is an independent grammatical pattern widely found in dialects and informal speech, and should not be confused with the logical double negation. In Tony's Italian-American vernacular, the negatives do not convey affirmation but merely intensify the negation. This dialectal syntactic feature effectively characterizes him as a straightforward, rough-edged working-class immigrant.

Since Chinese lacks a grammatical schema that employs double negation for emphatic purposes, the translator abandons any attempt to replicate the original syntactic deviation and instead uses a semantically equivalent colloquial expression. In the Chinese rendition, the adverb 才 (cái) in "才不带" inherently conveys a tone of resistance and stubbornness, which precisely matches Tony's assertive and obstinate character schema. When Chinese viewers encounter the everyday phrase "我才不……" (I simply won't...), they can quickly activate the linguistic schema of "categorical refusal," thereby fully restoring the emotional force of the original line.

3.2. Translation Strategies for Cultural Schema

In subtitle translation, cultural schema plays a particularly critical role. Cultural schema is the internal knowledge network through which individuals understand and interpret their own cultural phenomena, and it is also an indispensable reference framework for interpreting texts from other cultures. Green Book involves multiple cultural backgrounds, including racial segregation in 1960s America, Black music culture, and Italian-American community culture. Many culture-loaded words may present schema default or schema conflict for Chinese audiences. Therefore, the core task for the translator is not simply linguistic conversion, but rather building a cognitive bridge between two heterogeneous cultural schemas.

3.2.1. Schema Overlap: Literal Translation

Example 3:

Source: “Genius is not enough, it takes courage to change people’s hearts.”

Target: “仅有天赋远远不够，想要改变人心，需要足够的勇气。”

Analysis: In this case, the translation adopts a literal translation strategy, achieving a high degree of correspondence with the original in terms of syntax, lexicon, and metaphorical imagery, thereby realizing a triple overlap of linguistic schema, cultural schema, and textual schema. Core expressions such as “天赋 – 不够 – 改变人心 – 勇气” (genius-not enough-change people’s hearts-courage) activate similar cognitive frameworks in both Chinese and English, allowing the audience to comprehend without additional adaptation. At the same time, the translator compensates for the stylistic shift inherent in literal translation by adding modifiers such as “远远” (far from) and “足够的” (sufficient), reflecting a balanced approach of flexible literal translation. This case demonstrates that when schemas are highly overlapped, literal translation can achieve both formal fidelity and cognitive fluency.

Example 4:

Source: “The Negro Motorist Green-Book”

Target: “《黑人司机的绿皮书》”

Analysis: The “Green Book” was an actual travel guide published in the United States from the 1930s to the 1960s, marking hotels and restaurants in the South where Black motorists could safely stay. For Chinese audiences familiar with American racial history, the name itself can trigger relevant historical schemas; for those unfamiliar, the literal translation retains the proper noun, and the film context can help gradually build a new cultural schema. The translator did not adopt a free translation such as “黑人旅行指南” but preserved “绿皮书” as a concrete lexical item, respecting the source-language culture-specific item and aligning with the literal translation strategy.

3.2.2. Schema Conflict: Free Translation

Example 5:

Source: “Good luck! Break a leg.”

Target: “好运，演出顺利。”

Analysis: This is a traditional idiom in the English theater world, used to wish an actor good luck before a performance. Its literal meaning is “break a leg.” The cultural schema of this idiom originates from the theatrical superstition that saying “good luck” directly would bring bad luck, so one says the opposite (“break a leg”) to ward off misfortune. Chinese audiences completely lack this cultural cognition. Literal translation as “摔断一条腿” would not convey the blessing intention but would instead cause confusion or misunderstanding. The translator adopts free translation, replacing it with the common Chinese blessing expression for performance occasions, “演出顺利”. Although this abandons the source-language humor and industry color, it accurately conveys the pragmatic function of the expression—a pre-performance blessing. Within the limited time and space of subtitles, functional equivalence takes priority over formal correspondence.

3.2.3. Schema Default: Established-Equivalent Translation and Functional Substitution

Example 6:

Source: “Betty bought a bit of better butter.”

Target: “红凤凰、粉凤凰、红粉凤凰花凤凰。”

Analysis: The reason why Example 6 is classified as “functional replacement” is that it “abandons both form and semantics, preserving only the pragmatic function.” This sentence is an English tongue twister. Its core function is to train pronunciation through repetition of the /b/ sound; its semantic content has no practical communicative value. Literal translation as “贝蒂买了一点更好的黄油” would completely prevent Chinese audiences from recognizing its “pronunciation practice” function, and the source-language game schema would face total default. The translator abandons all the source’s semantics and form, replacing it with a ready-made Chinese tongue twister known to Chinese audiences—“红凤凰粉凤凰红粉凤凰花凤凰”—which similarly achieves pronunciation training through alternating labial and nasal sounds. Although the articulatory positions do not exactly match the source, the pragmatic function of “repeatedly practicing specific phonemes” is equivalently reconstructed. This type of treatment can be classified as functional-substitution cultural conversion: when the source-language function lies not at the semantic level but at the pragmatic level, the translator can find a functionally equivalent ready-made text in the target-language culture to achieve cross-cultural schema reconstruction.

Example 7:

Source: “As my mother always said, what kind of brand new fool are you?”

Target: “我妈常对我说，你真是傻出新境界了。”

Analysis: The source phrase “brand new fool” uses the adjective “brand new” (typically modifying objects) to modify a person, creating a humorous and sarcas-

tic effect of “the latest model of fool.” Chinese does not have the linguistic schema of “using object-modifying adjectives for people”; literal translation as “崭新的傻瓜” would not activate a humorous interpretation but would confuse the audience.

Example 7 is classified as “fixed equivalence” because it “undergoes formal transformation while preserving both meaning and pragmatic function.” The translation employs an existing fixed construction in Chinese, which has, by convention, assumed a rhetorical function equivalent to that of the original in the target culture. Consequently, no creative reconstruction is required; the translator need only match and invoke the corresponding construction. Here, the translator adopts an established-equivalent translation by using a ready-made Chinese colloquial evaluative construction “X 出新境界” (literally “X to a new level”). This construction already exists in Chinese and is commonly used for exaggerated evaluations (e.g., “懒出新高度”—lazy to a new height, “抠出新境界”—stingy to a new level, “丑出新境界”—ugly to a new level). By directly inserting “傻” (foolish) into the “X” slot, this treatment relies on Chinese audiences’ existing cognitive schema for this construction, instantly activating the humorous, exaggerated evaluative meaning of “unprecedented, extreme” without extra explanation. At the same time, “新境界” implies an “unprecedented” height of foolishness, achieving an equivalent correspondence with the “brand new” rhetorical function of “novel/unprecedented” in the source.

3.3. Dynamic Conversion of Context Schema

Context schema is an extended concept at the intersection of pragmatics and translation studies within schema theory. It refers to the translator’s overall cognitive framework of the language-use environment when understanding and reproducing the source text. Unlike language schema, which focuses on vocabulary and syntax, or cultural schema, which focuses on macro-cultural backgrounds, context schema focuses on the specific situational elements at the moment of communication.

Example 8:

Scene A—Interview Scene:

Source: “Plus I drive my boss home at night.”

Target: “并且我晚上会开车送我老板回家。”

Scene B—Gambling Table Scene:

Source: “Boss man’s calling./He ain’t my boss. I work for the record company.”

Target: “老大在找你了。/他不是我老大。我是给唱片公司干活的。”

Analysis: The same concept “boss” is translated differently depending on the communicative scene, demonstrating the dynamic conversion of context schema. Scene A is a formal job interview, where Tony needs to present his work history; “老板” (the standard Chinese word for “boss”) serves as a neutral term of address,

activating the social schema of “employment relationship,” matching the seriousness of the scene. Scene B is an informal social setting at a gambling table, where Tony is among gambling buddies and needs to maintain an independent stance. “老大” (an informal term for “boss” or “chief” with gangster-like connotations) carries a subcultural flavor and informal authority, fitting his lower-class Italian-American identity and reinforcing his confrontational attitude of “refusing to acknowledge Shirley’s authority.” The differentiated translations of the same concept in different scenes accurately activate the context schemas required for each respective scene.

4. Research Limitations

This study conducts a categorical analysis of subtitle translation in *Green Book* based on translation schema theory, with all selected examples drawn from the domestic theatrical release subtitle version. It should be noted, however, that a given audiovisual work often exists in multiple Chinese subtitle versions across different distribution channels, and their translation treatments frequently exhibit considerable divergence. Official theatrical subtitles, constrained by censorship regulations and production deadlines, tend to adopt domestication strategies to ensure smooth comprehension for the general audience. Subtitles on streaming platforms are subject to varying degrees of revision according to the target audience of each platform. Fan-made subtitles, by contrast, often place greater emphasis on preserving source-language cultural features and tend to favor foreignization strategies, which may result in markedly different treatments of slang and culturally loaded terms compared to official versions. Furthermore, different versions adopt different approaches to coping with cultural schema defaults—some opt for explanatory annotations, some simplify through functional substitution, while others retain the original form and leave interpretation to the audience. This study focuses solely on a single subtitle version and has not yet conducted a systematic comparison of schema processing across multiple versions. Future research may incorporate multi-version subtitles into a comparative analytical framework to further examine the interplay between translation strategy choices, distribution channels, and audience expectations.

5. Conclusion

Subtitle translation is not merely linguistic conversion but also schema reconstruction. The translator’s responsibility is not only to convey the literal meaning but also, through lexical choices, syntactic adjustments, and cultural conversion, to help target-language audiences build understanding and emotional experiences as close as possible to those of the source-language audience. Restricted by temporal and spatial conditions, subtitle translators must construct comprehensible cognitive schemas for Chinese audiences within the limited display time. Tony’s colloquial language variety with strong Italian-American community features, contrasted with Shirley’s formal and elegant elite discourse, forms a sharp stylis-

tic-schema contrast. Translators must maintain stylistic distinctiveness between the two registers while activating corresponding schemas through expressions familiar to Chinese audiences.

Schema theory originated in cognitive psychology and later expanded into translation studies and many other fields. Within the schema framework, translators need to consciously mobilize existing linguistic, cultural, and contextual schemas in their minds, effectively integrating them into the decoding and encoding processes of subtitle translation, continuously exerting their subjective agency and accumulating practical experience. Currently, subtitle translation is increasingly showing a trend of audiovisual integration, placing higher demands on translators' professional judgment and expressive ability. High-quality audiovisual subtitle translation should ensure both the visual appeal of the image and the accuracy, vividness, and expressiveness of the translated text, thereby truly realizing the value goal of cross-cultural communication.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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