Original Research Article

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 study examines subtitle translation strategies in BBC documentary films through the lens of Relevance Theory, using *Earth's Pulse* as a case study. Drawing on Sperber and Wilson's theoretical framework, this research analyzes how translators navigate cognitive-contextual challenges in documentary subtitle translation. The study identifies five primary translation strategies—domestication, addition, omission, substitution, and conversion—demonstrating how these strategies are guided by relevance-theoretic principles to facilitate cross-cultural communication. Through detailed analysis of translation examples, this research reveals that successful subtitle translation requires careful management of contextual assumptions, background knowledge negotiation, and processing effort minimization. These findings contribute to understanding subtitle translation as a relevance-guided cognitive process with practical implications for documentary translation practice.

Keywords: Relevance Theory, Subtitle Translation, Documentary Films, Cross-Cultural Communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

Documentary films combine educational content, narrative storytelling, and visual elements to communicate complex information about the natural world, scientific phenomena, and cultural practices. BBC documentaries, renowned for their high production values and authoritative content, present particular challenges for subtitle translators who must balance accuracy, readability, and cultural accessibility within severe spatial and temporal constraints (Díaz-Cintas & Remael, 2007).

Earth's Pulse (《地球脉动》), a landmark BBC natural history documentary series, exemplifies these challenges. The series combines breathtaking cinematography with sophisticated scientific narration, technical terminology, and cultural references requiring careful translation consideration. Subtitle translation operates under rigid constraints: limited screen space (typically 35-40 characters per line, maximum two lines), brief display time synchronized with speech, and the simultaneous presence of source language audio, target language text, and visual imagery (Gottlieb, 1992).

Relevance Theory, developed by Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995), provides a powerful cognitive-pragmatic framework for analyzing translation decisions. The theory's core principle—that human communication is guided by pursuing optimal relevance—offers particular insight into subtitle translation, where translators constantly negotiate between maximizing cognitive effects and minimizing processing effort for target audiences (Gutt, 1991, 2000).

This study investigates: (1) How translators apply relevance-theoretic principles in documentary subtitle translation to manage contextual assumptions; (2) What translation strategies emerge from relevance-guided decision-making; and (3) How these strategies balance the competing demands of informational accuracy, cognitive accessibility, and processing efficiency.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Subtitle Translation Studies

Subtitle translation has evolved from a peripheral concern to a central focus within audiovisual translation studies over the past three decades (Díaz-Cintas 2009; Pérez-González 2014). Early research emphasized technical constraints, with scholars such as Gottlieb (1992) identifying strategies that translators employ to cope with spatial and temporal limitations.

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These include condensation, deletion, paraphrase, and transfer, among others.

More recent scholarship has examined the multimodal nature of subtitled texts, recognizing that meaning construction involves simultaneous processing of visual images, soundtrack, and written subtitles (Gambier 2003; Taylor 2003). This multimodal perspective has led researchers to investigate how different semiotic channels interact to create coherent viewing experiences. Zabalbeascoa (2008) argues that subtitle translation should be understood as "constrained communication" where translators must balance multiple competing demands.

Documentary subtitle translation, specifically, has received increasing attention due to the genre's educational function and complex discourse features (Franco *et al.*, 2010). Documentaries typically contain specialized terminology, culture-specific references, and sophisticated rhetorical structures that pose particular challenges for translators. However, most studies have approached these challenges from descriptive or prescriptive perspectives rather than cognitive-pragmatic frameworks.

2.2 Relevance Theory in Translation Studies

Gutt (1991, 2000) pioneered applying Relevance Theory to translation, arguing that translation constitutes interlingual interpretive use—creating target texts that resemble source texts in relevant respects. This approach shifts focus from linguistic equivalence to communicative adequacy: successful translation achieves comparable cognitive effects with comparable processing effort in the target context.

Several scholars have extended relevance-theoretic translation analysis to audiovisual contexts. Bogucki (2004) applied Relevance Theory to analyzing subtitle translation strategies, demonstrating how translators manipulate contextual assumptions to achieve optimal relevance. Kovačič (1995) examined how subtitling constraints affect relevance calculation, arguing that spatial-temporal limitations necessitate prioritizing high-relevance information.

Jucker (1993) provided detailed relevance-theoretic analysis of discourse markers, demonstrating how linguistic elements guide context construction and background assumption negotiation.

Applying these insights to documentary subtitle translation, we can understand translation strategies as relevance-guided responses to cognitive-contextual challenges. When source and target audiences possess different cognitive environments—different cultural knowledge, different encyclopedic assumptions, different contextual accessibilities—translators must adjust texts to achieve comparable relevance (Setton & Dawrant, 2016).

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
3.1 Core Principles of Relevance Theory

Relevance Theory rests on two foundational principles (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1995). The Cognitive Principle of Relevance states that human cognition tends toward maximizing relevance—humans automatically process information yielding greatest cognitive effects for least processing effort. The Communicative Principle of Relevance posits that every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance.

Optimal relevance is achieved when communication produces adequate cognitive effects for minimal processing effort (Wilson & Sperber, 2004). Cognitive effects result when new information interacts with existing assumptions to strengthen existing assumptions, contradict and eliminate them, or combine with them to yield contextual implications (Blakemore, 1992). Processing effort encompasses mental resources required to access contextual assumptions, process linguistic input, and derive cognitive effects.

3.2 Context and Cognitive Environment

Relevance Theory conceptualizes context as "created as a function of utterance interpretation" rather than "given antecedently" (Jucker, 1993: 439). Context consists of assumptions from the hearer's cognitive environment—facts and assumptions manifest to an individual at a given time. Two aspects merit emphasis:

First, context is constructed during interpretation. As Jucker (1993: 439) explains, "utterances are always processed on the background of a relevant context consisting of the linguistic context and the assumed background assumptions of the addressee."

Second, speakers and hearers negotiate a mutual cognitive environment—assumptions mutually manifest to varying degrees of strength (Sperber & Wilson, 1986: 41-46). This has profound implications for translation: source and target audiences possess different cognitive environments shaped by distinct linguistic, cultural, and encyclopedic knowledge. Background assumptions strongly manifest to source audiences may be weakly manifest or entirely absent from target audiences' cognitive environments.

3.3 Relevance Theory and Translation

Gutt (2000: 102) argues that translation should be understood as "interlingual interpretive use" that aims to preserve the original text's presumption of optimal relevance for target audiences. This involves two translation modes: direct translation (which preserves complete interpretive resemblance) and indirect translation (which adapts content to target audiences' cognitive environments).

For subtitle translation specifically, translators must consider how target audiences' cognitive

environments differ from source audiences, and what contextual assumptions need to be made explicit or adapted. As Blakemore (1992: 180) emphasizes, successful communication depends on "the speaker's estimation of the listener's background assumptions."

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employs qualitative discourse analysis of Chinese subtitle translations in Earth's Pulse. Analysis focuses on segments where translators made notable strategic choices involving contextual adaptation, cognitive effort management, or information modulation.

Translation examples were selected using purposive sampling based on: (1) instances requiring significant contextual assumption renegotiation; (2) instances where background knowledge differs substantially between British/American and Chinese audiences; (3) instances demonstrating processing effort optimization under subtitle constraints; and (4) instances representing diverse translation strategies.

Each example was analyzed according to relevance-theoretic principles: how the translation strategy affects cognitive effects, processing effort, and optimal relevance for Chinese audiences. Analysis considered the mutual cognitive environment of target audiences, contextual assumptions required for interpretation, and how strategic choices facilitate comparable relevance to source text effects for source audiences.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Domestication

Domestication adapts source content to target culture norms and conventions, making contextual assumptions more readily accessible and reducing processing effort. From a relevance-theoretic perspective, domestication is employed when source culture-specific elements assume background knowledge strongly manifest in source audience cognitive environments but weakly manifest or absent in target audience cognitive environments.

Example 1:
English: The cave extends nearly three miles underground.
Chinese: 这个洞穴向地下延伸近 5 公里。(This cave extends nearly 5 kilometers underground.)

The translator converted imperial units (3 miles) to metric units (5 kilometers) familiar to Chinese audiences. This exemplifies how domestication operates as a processing effort reduction mechanism. In the source audience's cognitive environment, the imperial measurement system constitutes a strongly manifest contextual assumption—British and American viewers immediately derive cognitive effects from "three miles"

without conscious calculation. However, Chinese audiences operate within a fundamentally different cognitive environment where metric units form the basis of spatial conceptualization.

Processing "miles" would impose substantial processing effort on Chinese viewers, requiring either mental conversion or forming vague distance impressions, neither achieving optimal relevance. By converting to "5 公里," the translator ensures target audiences access identical contextual assumptions with minimal processing effort, maintaining informational parity while dramatically reducing cognitive load.

Example 2:
English: The peaks are as treacherous as Everest.
Chinese: 这些山峰如同珠穆朗玛峰一样危险。 (These peaks are as dangerous as Mount Qomolangma.)

The translator retained "Everest" conceptually while adding the Chinese designation "珠穆朗玛峰" (Mount Qomolangma), demonstrating sophisticated management of mutual cognitive environment between source and target audiences.

In the source text's cognitive environment, "Everest" functions as a maximally accessible reference point—a strongly manifest assumption about extreme altitude and danger that requires virtually no processing effort for British audiences. The name immediately activates a rich network of contextual assumptions: world's highest peak, deadly climbing conditions, ultimate mountaineering challenge. However, in Chinese audiences' cognitive environment, while "Everest" may be recognizable (weakly manifest), "珠穆朗玛峰" represents the primary, most strongly manifest designation for this mountain.

This partial domestication strategy optimizes relevance through two mechanisms. First, it reduces processing effort by providing immediate cognitive access through the familiar Chinese name, which activates target audience background assumptions more efficiently than the transliterated foreign name. Second, it maintains reference to the linguistic context established in the source text—the comparison of peak danger to Everest remains intact, preserving the analogy's communicative force.

5.2 Addtion

Addition supplies contextual information absent from or weakly manifest in target audience cognitive environments. This strategy directly addresses what Jucker (1993: 439) identifies as the need to "fill in some background assumptions" when the source text assumes knowledge not mutually manifest in the target context.

Example 4:
English: The Okavango, a river in southern Africa.
Chinese: 奥卡万戈河，位于非洲南部的博茨瓦纳境内。(The Okavango River, located in Botswana in southern Africa.)

The translator added "博茨瓦纳境内" (within Botswana), specifying the precise location. The addition of "博茨瓦纳境内" (within Botswana) reflects systematic evaluation of how geographical knowledge manifests across different cognitive environments. For British audiences, African geography represents moderately manifest contextual assumptions cultivated through colonial history, educational curricula emphasizing Commonwealth regions, and extensive media coverage of African affairs. When source audiences encounter "the Okavango" and "southern Africa," these designations provide adequate contextual grounding, activating background assumptions about regional geography, ecological systems, and wildlife habitats with minimal processing effort. The geographical reference generates sufficient cognitive effects for understanding subsequent narration about seasonal flooding and wildlife migration.

Chinese audiences, however, typically possess weaker manifest assumptions about African river systems and regional geography. When these audiences encounter "the Okavango" without further specification, contextual assumptions about precise location remain vague or entirely absent. This vagueness becomes problematic when subsequent documentary segments discuss ecological patterns, wildlife behaviors, and environmental changes dependent on understanding specific geographical contexts. Without knowing that the Okavango flows through Botswana into the Kalahari Desert, forming a unique inland delta, viewers cannot fully derive intended cognitive effects from subsequent narration.

The translator's addition of "Botswana" strengthens contextual assumptions necessary for comprehensive understanding, creating what Sperber and Wilson (1986) describe as mutual manifestness—making geographical specificity mutually manifest to target audiences just as it was mutually manifest to source audiences. This addition increases cognitive effects substantially: viewers gain clearer geographical orientation, enabling them to process subsequent ecological information against appropriate contextual assumptions.

Example 5:
English: Penguins huddle together for warmth.
Chinese: 企鹅们紧紧挤在一起御寒，这种集体行为能将体温保持在零下 20 度的环境中。(Penguins huddle tightly together to resist cold; this collective behavior can maintain body temperature in minus 20-degree environments.)

The translator added scientific explanation ("this collective behavior can maintain body temperature in minus 20-degree environments"), substantially enriching target audiences' cognitive environment with background assumptions about huddling's biological effectiveness.

In the source text, "huddle together for warmth" activates background assumptions about thermoregulation that most British audiences possess at general, impressionistic levels. Source viewers understand the basic principle: physical proximity generates warmth through body heat sharing, enabling survival in cold environments. These contextual assumptions generate adequate cognitive effects for casual viewing—audiences comprehend penguin survival strategy without requiring detailed biological mechanisms. The processing effort remains minimal, as the statement relies on everyday knowledge rather than specialized scientific understanding.

However, this level of explanation may produce different cognitive effects in Chinese versus British viewing contexts. BBC documentaries have cultivated specific audience expectations in British cognitive environment: nature programs balance spectacular visual imagery with accessible yet authoritative narration, assuming audiences seek entertainment and general education rather than rigorous scientific detail. Chinese documentary viewing conventions often expect more explicit scientific explanation. Nature documentaries in Chinese cognitive environment frequently emphasize quantitative precision, technical terminology, and causal mechanisms, reflecting broader cultural preferences for concrete, measurable information over impressionistic description.

The translator's addition addresses these differential expectations while enhancing cognitive effects for all viewers regardless of cultural background. By specifying "maintain body temperature in minus 20-degree environments," the translation makes explicit the remarkable biological effectiveness of huddling behavior. This explicitness transforms vague understanding—"provides warmth"—into precise scientific knowledge—effective temperature maintenance at extreme cold. These enhanced cognitive effects.

5.3 Omission
Omission eliminates source content when subtitle constraints prevent full rendering or when information carries low relevance for target audiences. From a relevance-theoretic perspective, omission is justified when preserved information would require disproportionate processing effort relative to cognitive effects, or when contextual redundancy renders information recoverable from visual or auditory channels.

Example 3:
English: The magnificent, awe-inspiring mountains stretch endlessly across the horizon.
Chinese: 山脉绵延至天际。(Mountains stretch to the horizon.)

The translator omitted "magnificent, awe-inspiring" and "endlessly," retaining core propositional content (mountains stretching across the horizon). This omission reflects multiple relevance considerations: First, visual imagery powerfully conveys magnificence—viewers see the mountains' grandeur, making verbal description partially redundant. Second, multiple adjectives increase processing effort for subtitle reading. Third, "绵延至天际" (stretch to the horizon) implicitly conveys vastness, making "endlessly" contextually recoverable.

And from the perspective of mutual cognitive environment, the mountains' visual magnificence becomes mutually manifest to all viewers regardless of subtitle content. Retaining the adjectives would essentially duplicate information already strongly present in the cognitive environment, increasing processing effort (additional reading time, attention split between text and imagery) while generating minimal additional cognitive effects. This violates optimal relevance principles—effort exceeds effect gain.

This example demonstrates that omission in subtitle translation is not information loss but rather strategic cognitive effect preservation through processing effort reduction, achieved by leveraging multimodal redundancy within the viewing cognitive environment.

Example 4:
English: The wolf pack, hunting as a coordinated team, working together in perfect synchronization, pursues the caribou.
Chinese: 狼群协同追捕驯鹿。(Wolf pack coordinatedly pursues caribou.)

The translator omitted "hunting as a coordinated team" and "working together in perfect synchronization," consolidating these repetitive coordination descriptions into the single term "协同" (coordinatedly). This omission reflects sophisticated management of linguistic context differences between oral narration and written subtitles within target audiences' cognitive environment.

Target audiences possess background assumptions about wolf hunting behavior—pack cooperation is common knowledge in Chinese cognitive environment, particularly for nature documentary viewers. Given these existing assumptions, extensive verbal elaboration of cooperation becomes partially redundant. The single term "协同" (coordinatedly) activates these background assumptions efficiently, generating adequate cognitive effects (understanding pack hunting strategy) without requiring multiple restatements.

5.4 Subtitution

Substitution replaces source culture-specific elements with target culture equivalents or more accessible alternatives, facilitating comparable cognitive effects through contextual assumptions more strongly manifest in target audience cognitive environments.

Example 5:
English: The tree is as tall as a 20-story building.
Chinese: 这棵树高达60米，相当于20层楼高。(This tree reaches 60 meters tall, equivalent to a 20-story building.)

The translator added metric measurement "60 米" (60 meters) while retaining the building comparison, creating dual reference points addressing different cognitive processing aspects. In the source text, "as tall as a 20-story building" provides intuitive scale reference activating background assumptions about building height, generating cognitive effects through relational understanding with minimal processing effort.

However, building heights vary significantly across cultures and construction periods, creating potential vagueness in cross-cultural contexts. The translator's addition of "60 米" provides complementary quantitative precision enhancing cognitive effects while respecting target audience measurement preferences. For Chinese audiences operating within metric measurement systems as strongly manifest contextual assumptions, "60 米" processes effortlessly while generating clear quantitative cognitive effects, enabling more precise comprehension of the tree's extraordinary scale.

5.5 Conversion

Conversion restructures linguistic forms—syntactic patterns, information structure, or semantic configurations—to align with target language processing preferences, minimizing processing effort while preserving cognitive effects.

Example 6:
English: The prey is stalked by the leopard with extraordinary patience.
Chinese: 猎豹以超凡的耐心跟踪猎物。(The leopard with extraordinary patience stalks the prey.)

The translator converted passive construction ("prey is stalked by leopard") to active voice ("leopard stalks prey"), conforming to Chinese preference for active constructions. Mandarin uses passive voice less frequently than English; active voice follows more

natural information flow in Chinese. This conversion reduces processing effort—readers process familiar syntactic patterns more efficiently—while preserving all semantic content and cognitive effects regarding the leopard's hunting behavior.

This conversion strategy demonstrates how optimal relevance can be maintained across languages despite surface structure differences. The source text achieves optimal relevance for English audiences through passive construction aligning with their linguistic background assumptions; the target text achieves comparable optimal relevance for Chinese audiences through active construction aligning with different linguistic background assumptions, minimizing processing effort within respective linguistic cognitive environments.

Example 7:
English: The ice rapidly melts in the spring warmth.
Chinese: 春季气温升高，冰雪迅速消融。(Spring temperature rises, ice and snow rapidly melt.)

The translator's restructuring makes the causal relationship explicit by verbalizing the process: "气温升高" (temperature rises) appears as an independent clause stating the causal factor, followed by the effect clause "冰雪迅速消融" (ice and snow rapidly melt). This structure reflects Chinese discourse preferences for explicit cause-effect relationships articulated through parallel clause structures mirroring event sequences.

The conversion generates multiple relevance-optimization effects simultaneously. First, verbalizing "warmth" as "气温升高" increases processability for Chinese audiences expecting process descriptions rather than nominalized states. Second, the cause-effect clause structure reduces processing effort by presenting information in logical causal sequence, matching Chinese readers' strongly manifest expectations about how causes and effects should be linguistically structured. Third, the conversion maintains all essential cognitive effects from the source text while processing more efficiently within the target cognitive environment.

5.6 Integrated Strategy Application
Many translation instances involve multiple strategies simultaneously, reflecting complex cognitive-contextual negotiations. These integrated applications demonstrate how translators optimize relevance through coordinated strategic choices.

Example 8: Domestication + Addition
English: The Rockies stretch over 3,000 miles.
Chinese: 落基山脉纵贯北美大陆，延伸超过 4,800 公里。(The Rocky Mountains run through the North American continent, extending over 4,800 kilometers.)

This translation combines domestication (converting miles to kilometers) with addition (specifying "北美大陆" - North American continent). The domestication component addresses measurement accessibility by converting "3,000 miles" to "4,800 公里," ensuring Chinese audiences derive quantitative cognitive effects with minimal processing effort. Imperial-to-metric conversion enables viewers to access contextual assumptions about mountain range scale using measurement units maximally manifest in their cognitive environment.

However, measurement conversion alone proves insufficient for optimal relevance. While Chinese audiences may recognize "Rockies" as a North American mountain range, precise geographical context remains weakly manifest. The addition of "纵贯北美大陆" (run through the North American continent) strengthens geographical contextual assumptions substantially. This phrase activates background knowledge about continental scale, helping viewers situate the mountain range within broader geographical frameworks. The integrated strategy ensures target audiences achieve comparable relevance to source audiences: understanding both precise quantitative scale through metric conversion and geographical significance through continental contextualization with proportionate processing effort.

Example 9: Omission + Conversion
English: The bear, having not eaten for months during its long winter hibernation, is desperately hungry.
Chinese: 冬眠数月未进食的熊饥饿难耐。(The bear having hibernated for months without eating is intolerably hungry.)

This translation integrates omission and conversion to manage subtitle constraints while optimizing Chinese processing. The omission strategy removes "long" and "desperately," reflecting sophisticated evaluation of essential versus redundant information within multimodal contexts. The descriptor "long" becomes recoverable from "for months," while "desperately" proves excessive for written subtitles where "饥饿难耐" (intolerably hungry) already conveys extreme hunger.

The conversion component restructures the participial phrase "having not eaten for months during its long winter hibernation" into the compact Chinese relative clause "冬眠数月未进食的" (hibernated for months without eating). This restructuring dramatically reduces processing effort by eliminating complex English participial construction and combining temporal duration, biological process, and resulting state into a single, efficiently processed modifying phrase. The integrated strategy achieves multiple relevance optimization goals simultaneously: reduced subtitle length, decreased processing effort through simplified

syntax, while preserving all essential cognitive effects regarding the bear's extended fasting period, biological context, and resulting extreme hunger.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has investigated subtitle translation strategies in BBC's *Earth's Pulse* through the theoretical lens of Relevance Theory, demonstrating how translators navigate the complex interplay between cognitive effects and processing effort in cross-cultural documentary communication. By analyzing five primary translation strategies—domestication, addition, omission, substitution, and conversion—this research has revealed how these techniques function as systematic cognitive-contextual management mechanisms rather than merely linguistic transfer tools.

And several limitations exists. First, the analysis focused exclusively on *Earth's Pulse*, limiting generalizability to other documentary genres. Second, text-based analysis lacks empirical validation of actual viewer responses. Third, the sample size remains limited despite purposive selection. Future research should extend this relevance-theoretic approach to diverse documentary types, incorporate reception studies using eye-tracking or comprehension tests to validate predicted cognitive effects, conduct larger-scale corpus analyses, and explore multiple language pairs beyond English-Chinese translation.

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