

Expansion Strategies in Chinese Translation: A Case Study of the Subtitles in *Dune: Prophecy*

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| <p>Corresponding Author: Gong Jia University of Shanghai for Science and Technology</p> <p>Article History Received: 03 / 02 / 2026 Accepted: 06 / 03 / 2026 Published: 18 / 03 / 2026</p> | <p>Abstract: Based on Wang Jianguo’s translation theory, this paper takes the subtitle translation of the television series <i>Dune: Prophecy</i> as a case study to explore the “expansion strategy” in English–Chinese translation and its applications. The study shows that, compared with the “compression” strategy typically discussed in Chinese–English translation, English–Chinese translation often requires expansion at the levels of language and cognition through semantic explicitation, logical cohesion, and cultural adaptation. The case analysis demonstrates that an awareness of expansion is reflected in the blurring of boundaries among cognitive semantics, structural form, and pragmatic rhetoric. Its core lies in reconstructing context and making logic explicit so as to balance the fluency of the target text with depth of meaning, thereby enhancing Chinese viewers’ comprehension of and emotional engagement with the plot. This study provides a theoretical reference for audiovisual translation practice and reveals the impact of expansion strategies on the aesthetic effect and communicative efficacy of translated subtitles in cross-cultural contexts.</p> <p>Keywords: <i>expansion strategy; Dune: Prophecy; subtitle translation.</i></p> |
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Introduction

With the increasingly frequent exchange of global film and television cultures, science-fiction television series have come to occupy an important position in the international audiovisual market thanks to their distinctive world-building and imaginative narrative appeal. *Dune: Prophecy*, a highly anticipated sci-fi series, has attracted a large audience with its grand *Dune* universe, intricate character relationships, and profound thematic implications. In the process of cross-cultural communication, subtitle translation serves as a crucial bridge connecting audiences of different languages to the content of the series. Compared with subtitle translation for audiovisual works of more conventional genres, subtitle translation for science-fiction dramas possesses particular distinctive features. It must not only deal with the accurate rendering of specialized terms, but also take into account audiences’ understanding and acceptance of the plot across different cultural backgrounds. Because characters’ lines on screen disappear instantly and the size of the screen is fixed, subtitle translation differs from other types of text translation and is characterized by immediacy, popular readability, comprehensiveness, and the absence of annotation (Qian Shaochang, 2000). For a science-fiction television series such as *Dune: Prophecy*, which constructs an entirely new and heterogeneous cultural universe, the quality of subtitle translation directly affects global audiences’ understanding and appreciation of the series. Therefore, an in-depth study of the Chinese subtitle translation strategies and methods used in this series can not only help improve its international communicative effect, but also offer useful reference for the subtitle translation of similar science-fiction dramas.

Overview of the Expansion Strategy

In English–Chinese translation, the expansion strategy is an important translational means aimed at making the target text better conform to the expressive habits and cultural background of Chinese, thus enhancing readability and fluency. The views of Wang Jianguo and He Ziran offer important insights into English–Chinese translation. Since process is expansive relative to result, while result is compressive relative to process, Wang Jianguo (2019) points out that Chinese–English translation is characterized by compression. Accordingly, we may infer that English–Chinese translation is characterized by expansion. Expansion is manifested in the explication of semantic information implicit in the source text, the enlargement of the source text’s imaginative space, and greater continuity in linguistic expression. It is often reflected in the weakening of boundaries among cognitive semantics, structural form, and pragmatic rhetoric, resulting in a more blurred sense of demarcation. In Chinese–English translation, compression should be adopted; by contrast, in English–Chinese translation, expansion should be used to weaken boundaries and create greater continuity. Ways of weakening boundaries include reducing the use of translational boundary markers—that is, functional words or empty words in English—and likewise reducing overt boundary-marking words in Chinese; using more verbs and fewer nouns, since nouns generally have the strongest boundary-defining force. There are many other methods as well, discussed in other chapters, such as talking more about events and less about objects, and using more process-oriented rather than result-oriented expression. Among these, explicitation—namely, rendering the source text’s implicit meaning overt through linguistic form—is the most important method within the expansion strategy in English–Chinese translation. However, this method is often described on the basis of



the final product of translation practice and is not always the result of a fully conscious choice on the part of the translator.

Analysis of the Chinese Subtitle Translation in *Dune: Prophecy*

The following is a specific analysis of selected Chinese subtitle examples from *Dune: Prophecy* in light of the expansion strategy used in English–Chinese translation.

Example 1

Source text: Others who shared my blood were resigned to living in shame.

Translation: 其他族人都认了命，甘愿生活在耻辱之中。

分析: The boundary marker “who” in the source text is a grammatical marker in English. In the Chinese subtitle, however, this relative pronoun introducing an attributive clause is eliminated, so the hierarchical relationship between the clauses is left for the reader to infer. This, in turn, increases both the fluency and the linear aesthetic quality of the Chinese translation. The word “resigned” commonly means “to resign,” “to give up,” or “to submit.” In this sentence, the official subtitle renders it as “认了命，甘愿，” which constitutes a semantic expansion and explicitation. Judging from the literal meaning, “resigned” itself does not explicitly contain the culturally and emotionally colored sense of “认命” (to accept one’s fate). Yet the translator makes the implicit meaning in the source text explicit through language, converting an abstract meaning that would not fit the context into a concrete expression suitable to the context. This makes the subtitle more consistent with Chinese expressive habits and more capable of conveying a feeling of helplessness. As for “living in shame,” the translator does not make excessive literal changes, but once it is combined with “认了命，甘愿，” the meaning of the whole sentence is expanded. Chinese readers can, through this phrasing, imagine a group resignedly accepting a humiliating way of life under difficult circumstances; this expansion is realized through logical coherence in context. The source expression “Others who shared my blood” is translated as “其他族人，” which simplifies the original wording to some extent and weakens its boundaries. By rendering it as “族人，” the translator turns a relatively abstract noun phrase into a concrete noun more natural in Chinese, making the expression clearer and more vivid. Through the word “其他，” the translator also establishes a logical relationship, implying the connection between the speaker and these “族人.” This explicitation of logical relations helps the audience better understand the interpersonal relationships in the plot. The whole sentence, through “都认了命，甘愿，” links the subject “其他族人” with the object “生活在耻辱之中，” forming a complete chain of logic. This accords with the flowing-sentence style common in Chinese and makes the subtitle smoother and easier to understand. At the cultural level, in Western culture “resigned” may be more closely associated with an individual’s choice and attitude, whereas in Eastern culture “认命” often suggests a choice made after repeated struggle and helplessness and carries a certain fatalistic coloring. Through this culturally loaded rendering, the translator enriches the audience’s understanding of the plot and gives the subtitle a distinctly Chinese aesthetic, making it better suited to Eastern viewers’ cultural cognition. Such expansion within a cultural context allows Eastern viewers to immerse themselves more fully in the plot and to feel the characters’ emotional conflicts and mental states within that cultural background. This emotional

intensification helps enhance the series’ expressive force and makes it easier for the audience to empathize.

Example 2

Source text: while my great-grandfather deserted the fight.

Translation: 还说我的曾祖父临阵逃脱。

分析: First, the official subtitle blurs the strong boundaries present in English. The boundary word “while” is not translated as “当……时，” and the Chinese subtitle also contains no explicit tense marker. As a result, viewers must infer from the context of the dialogue that this is something that happened in the past. This often increases the fluency of Chinese subtitles and also makes them more concise. In terms of expression, the translation also performs a certain expansion: “临阵逃脱” is a Chinese idiom that more vividly conveys the meaning of “deserted the fight” and carries a pejorative coloring, allowing viewers to more directly sense the speaker’s attitude toward the great-grandfather’s behavior. This accords with Chinese linguistic habits and cultural cognition. In Chinese, idioms often communicate complex meanings concisely yet forcefully, while also carrying emotional coloring; the use of this idiom therefore strengthens the line’s expressive power and emotional impact. In the English context, “deserted the fight” is a relatively straightforward expression that directly states the result. In the Chinese subtitle, however, the use of the culturally resonant idiom “临阵逃脱” makes the translation better suited to the Chinese cultural background. This helps Chinese viewers better understand the meaning and emotion behind the line. Gutt (1991) argues that “seeking optimal relevance” should serve as a guide for translators, meaning that readers or listeners of the translation should be able to fully understand the informational content without unnecessary effort, or obtain sufficient contextual effect. In the dramatic context, this line may relate to honor, family reputation, or a historical event. By using the idiom “临阵逃脱，” the subtitle more strongly conveys the possible negative impact of this act on the family’s reputation, leaves greater room for the audience’s imagination, and helps viewers better understand the relationships and conflicts among the characters. In terms of plot development, such an emotionally colored translation may also foreshadow later family conflicts or character confrontations, allowing viewers to anticipate the direction of subsequent events and thus increasing the attraction and tension of the narrative.

Example 3

Source text: This is no tool.

Translation: 这种做法不正当。

分析: In the original English, “tool” usually refers to an implement or instrument, but in this context it is clearly not meant literally. The translator expands it into “做法” (practice/approach), which is based on a semantic extension derived from the context. This expansion allows the subtitle to convey the intended meaning accurately in the Chinese context. If translated literally as “这不是工具，” it would sound abrupt and contextually inappropriate in Chinese. By extending the meaning of “tool” into “做法，” the translator is able to convey the speaker’s intention more effectively. The English sentence “This is no tool.” is a negative expression emphasizing that something is not a tool. In Chinese, “这种做法不正当” not only conveys the negation, but further

expands the meaning by implying that the practice is improper or inappropriate. This expansion makes the subtitle more consistent with Chinese expressive habits, enabling it not only to communicate the deeper meaning of the original accurately, but also to leave room for viewers to imagine the content and emotional force behind the line. In Western culture, “tool” may carry a wider range of metaphorical meanings, such as referring to a person being used as an instrument. In Chinese culture, however, “做法” more readily reflects the nature of a behavior. By translating “tool” as “做法,” the translator avoids misunderstanding that might arise from cultural differences. This translation takes into account differences between English-speaking and Chinese cultural contexts and, through semantic expansion, makes the subtitle more readable and comprehensible in Chinese. From the context, the line is a negative evaluation of a certain action in a particular situation. By translating “tool” as “做法” and adding the modifier “不正当,” the subtitle makes explicit the evaluative nature of “tool,” allowing viewers to clearly perceive its derogatory force and making the logic of the subtitle more coherent. In Chinese, “这种做法不正当” adopts a relatively formal and serious mode of expression, perhaps to convey a sense of authority or gravity. Stylistically, this better conforms to Chinese habits of expression and aesthetics while also transmitting the tone and emotion of the source text more effectively.

Example 4

Source text: And I, Valya Harkonnen, would set out to change it.

Translation: 而我瓦莉亚哈肯能立志要改变历史。

分析: The subtitle first makes explicit the identity of the agent who is going to change history, namely “瓦莉亚哈肯能。” In the Chinese translation, “Valya Harkonnen” is rendered as “瓦莉亚哈肯能” through direct transliteration, preserving the features of the original name. This is a common translation strategy, especially when proper names belong to a specific culture or a fictional world, since transliteration avoids possible misunderstanding that might arise from free translation and also deepens the audience’s impression of the protagonist, thus laying groundwork for later plot development. The phrase “would set out to change” in the source text is rendered as “立志要改变。” Instead of translating the future marker “would” explicitly as “将,” the translator expands “would set out” into “立志要,” which already contains a future-oriented sense. In this way, the boundaries marked in English are blurred and turned into the weaker boundaries more typical of Chinese style, leaving more room for the audience’s imagination. In Chinese, “立志” conveys determination and aspiration, not merely the meaning of “to begin doing something,” while “改变历史” is a highly weighty expression with a grand narrative quality that better highlights the character’s ambition. This makes the subtitle stylistically more consistent with Chinese expression and more capable of conveying the tone of the source text, while also making the character’s determination and aspiration more evident. The boundary word “and” is translated as the conjunction “而。” Unlike the basic meaning of “and,” which mainly indicates coordination or addition, “而” in Chinese can suggest transition or progression. The Chinese subtitle therefore expands this transitional force, which here serves to emphasize the character’s determination, make the logical relation of the sentence tighter, and sharpen the image of the protagonist in the audience’s mind. From the perspective of cultural background, “Harkonnen” is an important

family in the Dune series, one with a specific cultural and social status in the novels and related screen adaptations. Preserving the original name in translation enables viewers familiar with the Dune universe to quickly associate it with the family’s background and characteristics, thereby understanding the plot and the character’s motivation more effectively.

Example 5

Source text: I'd like to shove it in Vorian's face once you've made your mark.

Translation: 等你做出口碑之后 我要在沃里安面前好好炫耀一下

Analysis: The Chinese subtitle of this line fully reflects the use of expansion awareness in English–Chinese translation. Its core lies in transforming the implicit meaning of the source sentence into an explicit form that accords with Chinese expressive habits by explicating semantic elements, strengthening verbal dynamism, and adapting to the cultural context. In other words, the translator reconstructs the information by supplementing semantic elements not overtly stated in the original. The expression “shove it in...face” in the source text is fairly colloquial and vivid. In the subtitle, “好好炫耀一下” constitutes an expansion of this expression. The word “shove” literally means “to push” or “to thrust,” but the translator does not remain bound to the literal meaning; instead, through the word “炫耀,” the translator makes explicit the purpose of the action, namely, to display one’s achievement and sense of superiority. This rendering not only preserves the confrontational undertone of the original, but also makes the speaker’s emotional attitude more immediately accessible to Chinese viewers. In addition, the subtitle strengthens the dynamic force of the verbal expression. Compared with a literal rendering such as “把它塞到沃里安脸上,” “在沃里安面前好好炫耀一下” is more natural and idiomatic in Chinese, and it better fits the emotional coloring of spoken dialogue. Moreover, the temporal clause “once you've made your mark” is rendered as the clause “等你做出口碑之后,” which makes the chronological sequence explicit and reduces reliance on functional words such as “once,” thereby making the sentence more consistent with the natural expression of sequence in Chinese. Finally, the translator strikes a balance between heterogeneity and domestication. The personal name “Vorian” is transliterated as “沃里安,” preserving the estranging quality of the original name and meeting the representational needs of a science-fiction work with an exotic cultural setting, while also lowering the threshold of comprehension for the audience.

Example 6

Source text: Do you know what strikes me as odd?

Translation: 但有个问题让我百思不解。

Analysis: The expression “strikes me as odd” in the original English is relatively concise and, if translated directly, would mean something like “让我觉得奇怪。” The Chinese subtitle, however, renders it as “但有个问题让我百思不解,” which involves semantic expansion. “百思不解” emphasizes both the process and the depth of thinking, making explicit the source text’s implicit semantic element of the speaker’s repeated contemplation of this “odd” matter. As Wang Jianguo points out, explicitation means rendering the source text’s implicit meaning

overt through linguistic form, and this translation is precisely an example of that method. English expression is relatively concise and direct, whereas the Chinese subtitle “但有个问题让我百思不解” adds wording such as “有个” and “百思,” making the whole sentence conform more closely to Chinese habits of expression and enhancing cohesion. English often relies on function words or empty words to express grammatical relations, while Chinese tends to convey meaning through the collocation of content words and word order. Here, the Chinese translation reduces dependence on the grammatical structure of the English original and adopts a form more consistent with Chinese ways of thinking, making the subtitle more natural and fluent and thereby weakening boundaries. The English source “strikes me as odd” simply states a feeling, whereas the Chinese subtitle “百思不解” uses a process-oriented expression that foregrounds the act of pondering, rather than merely giving the result “觉得奇怪.” This corresponds more closely to the Chinese tendency to favor process-oriented expression and also improves readability for viewers. The use of the expansion strategy helps the audience better understand both the plot and the inner activity of the characters. In the viewing situation of a television drama, audiences have little time to dwell on the meaning of language, and a translation of this sort can convey the original intention and emotion more quickly and accurately.

Example 7

Source text: like the others, this soldier will learn.

Translation: 这个士兵会跟其他人一样付出代价。

Analysis: The English subtitle “will learn” literally means “will learn” or “will come to know,” but in the dramatic context the Chinese subtitle “会跟其他人一样付出代价” expands and makes explicit its implicit meaning. The English expression is comparatively restrained and only states that the soldier will “learn,” whereas the Chinese subtitle explicitly presents the negative consequence—“付出代价.” As stated in *Foundations and Practice of English–Chinese Translation*, explicitation means expressing the implicit meaning of the source text through linguistic form. English and Chinese differ in both linguistic structure and expressive habits. English places emphasis on hypotaxis and relies on function words and the like to mark grammatical relations, whereas Chinese emphasizes parataxis and focuses more on semantic coherence. The sentence “Like the others, this soldier will learn.” is structurally quite clear, with “Like” indicating a comparative relationship. The Chinese subtitle “这个士兵会跟其他人一样付出代价,” however, weakens this formal boundary and presents the meaning in a way more consistent with Chinese expression, thereby enhancing coherence and naturalness. This accords with the principle that the expansion

strategy in English–Chinese translation weakens boundaries—that is, it reduces reliance on English functional markers and instead adopts a formulation more consistent with Chinese cognitive and expressive habits. In English, “will learn” is a relatively broad, result-oriented expression; the Chinese subtitle “会跟其他人一样付出代价,” by contrast, uses a more concrete process-oriented expression that foregrounds the act of “paying a price,” enabling viewers to understand the development of the plot and the trajectory of the character’s fate more directly. This helps the audience grasp information quickly and accurately while watching the drama. In addition, since television drama is a vehicle of cultural communication, subtitle translation must also consider the cultural background of the target audience. The Chinese subtitle “这个士兵会跟其他人一样付出代价” is concise and clear, matching Chinese viewers’ linguistic habits and cultural cognition. In Chinese culture, such an expression is immediately intelligible and can readily evoke resonance, thereby helping viewers better immerse themselves in the plot.

Conclusion

This paper analyzes the Chinese subtitles of *Dune: Prophecy* from the perspective of the expansion strategy. It can be seen that, from semantic explicitation to the weakening of boundaries and the adjustment of modes of expression, this strategy fully demonstrates its key role in facilitating the conversion between source language and target language and in improving translation quality. It not only makes the translation better conform to Chinese expressive habits and helps viewers understand the plot, but also plays a positive role in cultural transmission. Of course, translation is always a creative and challenging activity. In the future, translators still need to continue exploring and practicing so as to make better use of translational means such as the expansion strategy, promote the development of audiovisual translation, and achieve higher-quality cross-cultural communication.

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