

Explicitation Strategies in the English Subtitling of the Film Hidden Blade

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Abstract

This paper explores the use of explicitation strategies in the English subtitling of films, focusing on how such strategies are applied during the translation process. In translation studies, explicitation has become a prominent area of interest, particularly in the context of subtitling, which is constrained by strict temporal and spatial limitations. Ensuring both accuracy and clarity in translated subtitles is therefore crucial. Using the Chinese film *Hidden Blade* as a case study, this paper conducts a detailed analysis of its English subtitles, quantifying the instances and proportions of explicitation. The findings reveal that the translator actively employed various explicitation strategies to enhance the readability and accuracy of the subtitles. Through concrete examples, the study further demonstrates that these strategies can help address the challenges inherent in audiovisual translation and ultimately improve the viewer's experience.

Keywords

Explicitation; subtitle translation; *Hidden Blade*

1. Research Background

Hidden Blade is a stylistic and intense film that portrays the complex world of espionage during the Second Sino-Japanese War. Directed and written by Cheng Er and starring Tony Leung and Wang Yibo, the film begins with the historical event of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Against the backdrop of the ensuing Pacific War, it depicts the drastic shift in China's wartime situation. Focusing on the underground intelligence operations of the Chinese Communist Party in Shanghai, the film follows how agents navigated the complex web of political forces—Chongqing, the Wang Jingwei regime, and Japanese spy agencies—to make a significant contribution to China's resistance efforts.

At the 36th Golden Rooster Awards of China held on October 15, 2023, *Hidden Blade* received eight nominations, including Best Feature Film, Best Director, Best Supporting Actor, Best Art Direction, Best Screenplay, and Best Leading Actor. Tony

Leung won Best Leading Actor, while Cheng Er took home the Best Director award—highlighting the film’s artistic recognition. In November of the same year, the film was also selected as one of the Top 10 “Golden Angel Films” at the 19th Chinese American Film Festival. Beyond its domestic success, the film has been screened in regions such as the United States, Canada, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and Thailand. Notably, it broke a 20-year box office record for Chinese films in Thailand, according to data from Thailand Box Office.

The film’s critical and commercial success both in China and internationally underscores the significance of studying its English subtitling. Investigating its subtitling strategies—particularly the use of explicitation strategies—can help ensure that the film’s content is conveyed clearly in cross-cultural contexts. This enhances not only the audience’s viewing experience but also the film’s global reach. Moreover, it contributes to understanding the factors behind *Hidden Blade*’s international success and offers insights into how Chinese cinema can improve its global presence and cultural influence.

2. Theoretical Foundation

This chapter provides a brief introduction to the theoretical foundation of the study, including explicitation theory and the basic features of subtitling. These elements will serve as theoretical support for the case analysis in the following chapters.

2.1. A Brief Overview of Explicitation Theory

The concept of “explicitation” was first introduced by Vinay and Darbelnet, referring to a translation technique that makes implicit information in the source text explicit in the target text [1]. Nida expanded on this idea with the concept of “addition” [2]. Later, Blum-Kulka proposed the “explicitation hypothesis”, suggesting that translators tend to increase textual cohesion in translation, making the target text more explicit than the source, though potentially more redundant [3]. Seguinot challenged this definition, arguing that explicitation should refer only to additions that cannot be explained by structural or stylistic differences between languages. She identified three types: expressing the information that is not in the original, presenting the implicit information of the ST more explicitly in the TT, and highlighting the key elements of the ST in the TT [4]. Since the 1990s, corpus-based studies have provided strong evidence for the universality of explicitation in translation, with Papai distinguishing between explicitation as a strategy and as a product feature [5]. Diaz Cintas and Remael categorized explicitation as an interpretive strategy, including addition, substitution, and omission. They also noted that replacing terms with hyponyms or hyperonyms may enhance clarity but could reduce cultural specificity, a common issue in subtitling [6]. Klaudy classified explicitation into four types: obligatory, optional, pragmatic, and translation-inherent [7]. While this typology has been widely accepted, the category of translation-inherent explicitation has been

criticized for its vague definition [8].

Chinese scholars have also explored explicitation from various perspectives, including language structure, translator cognition, and sociocultural context. He Xianbin found that Chinese translations often present clearer semantic references and logic [9]. Ke Fei attributed explicitation to multiple influencing factors [10]. Zhou Hongmin summarized and categorized its manifestations in English-Chinese translation [11]. Wang Kefei emphasized both surface-level and deep-level explicitation [12]. Dai Guangrong and Xiao Zhonghua, using corpus data, examined explicitation in word classes and its related strategies through quantitative analysis [13].

2.2. Overview of Subtitling

Subtitling is widely regarded as a distinct form of translation [14]. It is commonly used to introduce foreign media content such as films, TV series, and documentaries. Diaz Cintas and Remael further define subtitling as a translation practice involving written text—usually displayed at the bottom of the screen—that conveys not only the original spoken dialogue but also other verbal elements shown on screen (e.g., letters, inserts, graffiti, inscriptions, signs) and auditory content (e.g., songs, voiceovers) [6].

Unlike traditional forms of translation such as books or academic texts, subtitling faces unique constraints. Because viewers must read and understand the subtitles within a short span, the language must be concise and clear. Typically, subtitles remain on screen for 1.5 to 3 seconds, with each line limited to 35–42 characters and a maximum of two lines totaling 70–84 characters. Translators must therefore convey meaning within tight spatial and temporal limits, often simplifying complex sentences and adopting direct, brief expressions. Words or phrases that do not affect comprehension may even be omitted to ensure clarity. Furthermore, translators must take the audience’s cultural background into account and appropriately adapt or explain culture-specific references.

Hatim and Mason identify four major challenges in subtitling: converting spoken to written language, limited screen space, time constraints reducing retrievability, and the need to coordinate with visual imagery [15]. As Pérez-González notes, “people speak much faster than they read,” making it difficult for subtitles to fully reproduce the source dialogue [16]. Empirical studies show that subtitled text typically conveys about 43% less content than the original speech.

Given these constraints, the use of explicitation strategies is essential in subtitling. Such strategies help ensure accurate information transfer, bridge cultural gaps, enhance emotional resonance, and improve viewer comprehension.

3. Explicitation in the English Subtitling of *Hidden Blade*

In the field of translation studies, explicitation and other translation universals have become focal points for scholars both in China and abroad. Due to its inherent con-

straints—particularly limitations in time and space—subtitling has long been regarded as one of the more challenging forms of translation. Translators must produce subtitles that are both accurate and clear, all within a highly restricted format. In light of these challenges, this section aims to examine the phenomenon of explicitation in English subtitles through a case study of the Chinese film *Hidden Blade*, focusing on the specific explicitation strategies employed.

The theoretical framework adopted here is based on a broad definition of explicitation, which closely aligns with Seguinot's view. According to this perspective, any instance where the target text presents information more clearly or explicitly than the source text—whether through clearer meaning, more explicit logical connections, or a heightened emphasis on the core message—can be classified as explicitation.

For the purposes of this study, the author analyzed the official version of the film available on Youku (a Chinese video platform). The full film contains 991 subtitle segments. Given that a substantial portion of the dialogue is in Japanese, these were excluded, leaving 634 valid Chinese segments for analysis. Based on the broad definition of explicitation, a manual assessment revealed that 92 segments (14.51%) demonstrated an increase in explicitness, while 13 segments (2.05%) showed a decrease (i.e., implicitation). These figures suggest that the English subtitles of *Hidden Blade* exhibit a notable overall increase in explicitation. The specific data is presented in the table below.

Degree of Explicitation in the Subtitles of *Hidden Blade*

	Valid Chinese Segments	Explicitated Segments	Implicitated Segments
Number of Segments	634	92	13
Proportion	100%	14.51%	2.05%

Source: Manual Statistics

4. Major Explicitation Strategies in the English Subtitles of *Hidden Blade*

Analysis reveals that the increased explicitation in the English subtitles is largely the result of deliberate translation strategies employed by the translator. These include lexical expansion, replacing general terms with more specific ones for greater semantic clarity, shifting pronouns to proper nouns for clearer reference, adding connectives, restructuring sentences and paragraphs to enhance logical coherence, replacing nicknames with formal terms of address, converting non-standard language into standard varieties, omitting figurative imagery, and converting metaphors into similes [9]. Based on a detailed sentence-by-sentence analysis, the author concludes that explicitation in *Hidden Blade* is mainly achieved through the following four strategies: lexical addition, specification, sentence restructuring, and language standardization.

4.1. Lexical Addition

In subtitle translation, lexical addition refers to the insertion or supplementation of implicit information from the source text in order to make the target-language expression clearer and easier to understand. This strategy plays a crucial role in subtitle translation, as it helps eliminate ambiguity and vagueness in the original text, enabling the audience to better comprehend the subtitles. By adding words, the subtitles can also provide necessary contextual cues to help viewers understand characters' emotions, relationships, and underlying meanings.

ST1: 死了就是死了

TT1: A death sentence is a death sentence.

This line is spoken as Secretary Ye and Captain Wang are on their way to the execution ground. The phrase “死了” refers to being executed, which requires viewers to infer the meaning from context. The translator renders it as “A death sentence,” removing the need for interpretive effort from the target audience. This added specificity clarifies the implied meaning of the original line, achieving explicitation through lexical addition.

ST2: 你怎么知道的

TT2: I asked, how did you know?

In this scene, Secretary Ye firmly questions Captain Wang about how he discovered sensitive personal information. The translator skillfully inserts “I asked” at the beginning of the sentence. This addition not only reinforces the interrogative tone but also highlights Ye's urgency and intensity. By making the speaker's emotional state more explicit, the subtitle becomes clearer and more impactful, allowing the audience to more directly sense Ye's emotional tension.

4.2. Using Specific Terms

In subtitle translation, employing specific terms to achieve explicitation is an important way to enhance subtitle quality and audience comprehension. Specific terms can clarify vague or abstract expressions, helping viewers quickly and accurately understand the subtitle content within limited reading time. This improves subtitle clarity and accuracy, provides necessary background information, enhances cultural understanding, conveys implicit meanings, simplifies and clarifies expression, and preserves emotional tone—thus enriching the overall viewing experience.

ST3: 正好赶上南京

TT3: The Nanjing massacre happened.

In the film, this sentence introduces the background of Yoshikawa. Previously, it mentioned that Yoshikawa “was suddenly conscripted into the army in the 26th year of the Republic of China.” Then “正好赶上南京” follows. For viewers familiar with Chinese history, the year and Nanjing together naturally evoke the Nanjing Massacre event without much explanation. However, for English-speaking audiences unfamiliar with this historical knowledge, the translator renders “南京” as the

more specific “Nanjing massacre,” conveying the implicit information and enhancing foreign viewers’ cultural understanding, thus making the originally abstract expression more concrete and explicit.

ST4: 为什么弃暗投明

TT4: Why did you change sides?

Here, Director He of the Kuomintang interrogates Mr. Zhang of the Communist Party about why he abandoned his original ideals to join the Kuomintang. From Director He’s perspective, “弃暗投明” conveys a sense of turning from darkness to light, which requires knowledge of Chinese history to fully understand. For English audiences, this abstract expression is difficult to grasp. Therefore, the translator renders it concretely as “change your side,” clearly indicating the act of changing political parties, making the implicit meaning explicit so viewers can understand the subtitle content without relying on background knowledge.

4.3. Adjusting Sentence Structure

Nida believes that “in translating from one language to another, some adjustment of sentence structures is necessary” [17]. In subtitle translation, adjusting sentence structure reorganizes the sentence components of the source text to make the conveyed information clearer and easier to understand. It simplifies complex expressions, making subtitles more concise and coherent, thus improving viewers’ reading speed and comprehension. By rearranging sentence elements, ambiguity in the original text can be eliminated, and key information can be placed in prominent positions so the audience quickly grasps the core content, avoiding difficulties caused by dispersed information.

ST5: 我何某人当年在广州没有被炸死

TT5: I survived the bombing back in Guangzhou.

The original sentence is colloquial, with loose logical connections and a casual word order. English tends to emphasize logical relations between sentences and sentence components and prefers placing time and place either at the beginning or end of a sentence. Therefore, the translator renders it as “I survived the bombing back in Guangzhou,” strengthening the logical connection and conforming to English reading habits. The key point—“not killed in the bombing”—is highlighted at the beginning, making the sentence structure clearer and helping viewers focus on the core message.

ST6: 上海也好 南京也好 武汉也好

TT6: Mr. Chiang had been in Shanghai, Nanjing, and Wuhan.

The original subtitle presents three parallel short phrases. The speaker intends to express that these three cities were all places Mr. Chiang had abandoned. The translation adopts a common English expression by turning these into a complete sentence, which is both grammatically and semantically consistent with English norms, creating a coherent and logically connected whole. The translator also added the

conjunction “and,” improving coherence and logical flow, which enhances the readability and acceptability of the subtitle.

4.4. Language Standardization

Non-standard language, such as dialects or slang, often carries regional or group-specific meanings and usages, which may confuse foreign audiences. First, non-standard language often has multiple interpretations or vague meanings, which can cause ambiguity in audience understanding. By standardizing non-standard expressions into standard language, such ambiguity can be removed, ensuring the subtitles convey accurate meanings. Secondly, non-standard language often carries specific cultural and social connotations. In subtitle translation, converting informal language into standard forms better aligns with widely accepted cultural norms, avoiding expressions that might cause misunderstanding or offense, thereby achieving explicitation of subtitle content.

ST7: 黑店

TT7: Sneaky restaurant tricks.

Here, Mr. Ye criticizes a breakfast shop for high prices and small portions. “黑店” is a non-standard term reflecting the character’s cynical personality. However, a literal translation is hard for English audiences to accept. Hence, the translator uses a standardized form “Sneaky restaurant tricks,” straightforwardly expressing the shop’s deceptive practices and high prices, saving viewers time to understand and avoiding ambiguity, making the subtitle clear and explicit.

ST8: 没戏唱了

TT8: She's hopeless.

“没戏唱了” is a common Chinese idiom meaning that a matter cannot succeed or be sustained. Here, Captain Wang evaluates Miss Jiang, implying she is doomed and has no hope to survive. The translator directly discards the metaphorical expression and translates it as “She’s hopeless,” which avoids misunderstanding or confusion and achieves clarity in the subtitle content.

5. Conclusion

This paper examines the explicitation strategies in subtitle translation, highlighting their significance. Faced with strict time and space constraints, subtitles must be both accurate and clear. Through theoretical review and a case study of the film *Hidden Blade*, it is found that translators actively apply explicitation strategies such as addition, use of specific terms, sentence restructuring, and language standardization. These improve clarity and comprehension, enhancing the viewing experience. In summary, explicitation strategies are indispensable tools in subtitle translation. Further research on their application is necessary to improve translation quality and audience experience in the future.

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