

# Strategies of Humor Discourse Translation from the Perspective of Skopos Theory——a Case Study of the Sitcom *the Big Bang Theory*

Yu,Xueqin

Wuhan Institute of Design and Sciences, Wuhan, Hubei, 430000, China

**Abstract:** In recent years, a growing number of western audiovisual works come to China, and the demand on audiovisual translation is rising. Against such a background, China's fansub groups come into being. Fansub groups are groups of amateur translators providing audiovisual translation for free. US sitcoms translated by fansub groups have attracted a large number of followers. This thesis aims to enable us have a better understanding of translation strategies which can be applied to translation of sitcoms and create subtitle translation of high quality.

This thesis is based on the Skopos Theory, and it makes a case study of selected examples from the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*. Four principal strategies are concluded in this essay including literal translation, web language, comment-making and classical Chinese and dialects. This thesis will attract more attention to translation of humor discourse so that more research on this will be conducted. In this way, subtitle translation of sitcoms can be improved and the audience can enjoy western audiovisual works better.

**Keywords:** Skopos Theory; Subtitle translation; Humor discourse; Translation strategies; Sitcoms

DOI: 10.62639/sspjiss11.20250203

## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, an increasing number of western audiovisual works are pouring into China, and the demand on audiovisual translation is rising. In this case, China's fansub groups come into being. Fansub groups refer to groups of amateur translators providing audiovisual translation for free. Subtitle translations by fansub groups have attracted lots of followers.

The quality of the subtitle translation must be ensured in order to enable the audience to appreciate the western sitcoms. Therefore this essay looks at selected humor translation from the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* in which main strategies of subtitle translation from the perspective of Skopos Theory can be analyzed. This can urge more people to pay attention to humor translation and conduct relevant researches, which can further improve the humor translation of sitcoms.

## 2. Literature Review

### (1) Previous studies on skopos theory

Skopos Theory was introduced to China in the 1980s. Hans Vermeer (1970) put forward Skopos Theory so that translation researches can move away from the restrictions of original text centered thoughts. According to Skopos Theory, translation is a purposeful action based on the original text, which must be accomplished through negotiation. Several rules should be followed during this process, among which skopos rule is the most crucial. That is to say, the translation depends on the purpose. Besides, it is the translator that decides when and how to finish the translation.

## (2) Previous studies on humor translation

Zhang Yan (2008) pointed out that humor is an international art. People of different backgrounds have different understandings of humor. There exist differences between Chinese and Western humor. Delia Chiaro (2010) pointed out that the GTVH provides the basis for measuring the similarity of the source language and the target language. This is helpful to the analysis of humor translation. However, it can only measure oral humor and seems inadequate in the analysis of humor by other media. In addition, the distinction between different parameters in this theory is not very clear.

In conclusion, many Chinese experts have made in-depth studies on the deficiency of humor in translation, discussing the translatability and untranslatability of humor. However, there is a lack of studies on translation strategies. Studies abroad focus more on the theories and have achieved a lot of accomplishments. But they lack of practical humor translation strategies and methods.

## 3. Translation Strategies and Methods: a Case Study of *The Big Bang Theory*

### (1) Literal translation

Literal translation strives to reproduce both the ideological content and the style of entire literary work and retain as much as possible the figures of speech and the main sentence structures or patterns. Literal translation has a few advantages over other translation methods. It is loyal to the original text, making the audience have a better understanding of the context. Also, it can preserve the cultural characteristics of the source language. Additionally, literal translation enables us to learn vivid foreign expressions. Literal translation is frequently used in *the Big Bang Theory*.

[Scene: Leonard gave Penny a gift after coming back from the North Pole.]

SL: Penny: Oh, boy. What is it?

TL: Zhe shi shen me?

SL: Leonard: It's a snowflake. From the North Pole.

TL: Yi pian xue hua, bei ji de xue hua.

SL: Penny: Are you serious?

TL: Zhen de ma?

SL: Leonard: It'll last forever. I preserved in a one percent solution of polyvinyl acetal resin.

TL: Yong bu bian zhi de, wo ba ta bao cun zai chun jing de ju yi xi chunsuo quan shu zhi li le.

SL: Penny: Oh, my God. That's the most romantic thing anyone's ever said to me that I didn't understand.

TL: Zhe shi wo ting dao dan mei neng li jie de hua zhong zui lang man de yi ju.

SL: Leonard: It's actually a pretty simple process. You see, cyanoacrylates are monomers which polymerize on-

TL: Qi shi zhe ge guo cheng ting jian dan de, qing ji bin xi suan ku hui ju jie yu...

One of the principles of the Skopos Theory involves fidelity principle. That means inter-textual coherence should exist in the translation and the source text. Literal translation is loyal to the source text, which is consistent with the fidelity principle. In the example above, when Leonard gives penny the present, she has no idea what it is. So Leonard explains that in a scientific way. He says: "It will last forever. I preserved in a one percent solution of polyvinyl acetal resin. It's actually a pretty simple process. You see, cyanoacrylates are monomers which polymerize on...". The translator gives literal translation for this. If we give a translation explaining Leonard's words into something which

can be easily understood by the audience, we can not show the nerdy and cute image of Leonard. There are many complicated scientific expressions in this sitcom, and most of them are literally translated by the fansub groups in order to keep the special characteristic of this show.

## (2) Online buzzword

Web language is also used by fansub groups as an effective translation strategy. Nowadays, web language is considerably popular in China. It is used for communicating on the internet. In addition, web language is also frequently used in spoken language by lots of people especially young people. In the following part, I will analyze some examples from the *Big Bang Theory*.

SL: Penny: See, i can't do it.

TL: Chen qie zuo bu dao a.

[Sheldon and Leonard are arguing]

SL:Sheldon: Oh, I hardly think so!

TL:Keng die ne ni

In the example above, the translator substitute online buzzword for literal translation. "Chen qie zuo bu dao a,Keng die ne ni" is used here. These online buzzwords are humorous themselves. Therefore they can intensify the humorous effects. If we give literal translations as "Zhe wo zuo bu dao, Wo bu zhe me ren wei", the audience will not feel so funny. Online buzzword can produce several positive effects. It can provide pleasure for both the audience and the translator. Also, it can make the translation a work of art worth collecting. Another important point is that fansubbers can enjoy the process of translating more and will not feel bored when using those funny web languages.

## (3) Comment- making

Comment- making is an increasingly popular translation strategy. It is intended to extend fansubber's personal feelings or opinions on the show. Some people consider comment-making as a translation strategy under the category of note-adding for the reason that the majority of the comments are made in the form of notes. Though there exists an essential difference between them. The comment is not an inevitable part of the explanation so it can be cut down from the subtitle. Sometimes people may think that fansubbers just add comments very casually, but this is not true. Fansubbers add the comments on the screen to achieve certain purposes. And the works of them are examined seriously by the checker of the group. Comment- making can be seen used in *the Big Bang Theory*.

SL: Zack: Hold on. The costume came with a black wig. Where is it, babe?

TL: Deng deng. Na tao fu zhuang li de jia fa ne, bao bei?

SL: Penny: No. I'm not wearing it. It looks stupid.

TL: Wo bu dai na ge. Kan zhe xun bi le.

TL: Zack: Come on. We're trying to win a contest here.

TL: Bai tuo. Wo men ke shi yao qu bi sai zheng guan jun.

Penny: Forget it. I'm not wearing the wig.

TL:Xiang dou bie xiang, fan zheng wo bu dai.

SL: Zack: Penny, there's no "I" in "Justice League."

TL: Penny, zheng yi lian meng li mei you xiao wo zhi shuo. (Actually, there is an "I" in the word Justice!!!)

## (4) Classical Chinese and dialects

Fansub groups also employ classical Chinese and dialects as a strategy of humor translation. This process includes

two processes. Firstly, fansubbers translate English subtitle into Chinese. Then the version of classical Chinese or Chinese dialects need to be given. The image of foreign people and the subtitle written in Chinese style offer a contrast, intensifying the humorous effect, evoking the audience to laugh and providing a more intimate translator-audience relationship. This method requires high proficiency of both English and Chinese. An important point is that this method does not apply to all sentences. It is the fansubber that needs to judge whether the sentence should be translated in such a way. These are the examples of using classical Chinese and dialects from the tv series.

SL:Sheldon: But I realize now, you want the mindless nattering of complacent yes-men.

TL:Er wo xian zai yi shi dao, ni bu guo shi xi huan mang mu feng cheng de ying sheng chong.

SL:Penny: Oh, yes. He says they are lost without you.

TL:Mei cuo, ta shuo ni bu zai ta men jiu qun long wu shou le.

SL:Sheldon: Agreed. Wait till you hear how he dumbs down Werner Heisenberg for the crowd. You may actually believe you're in a comedy club.

TL:Mei cuo, ni dne zhe ting ta gen da jia hu che Werner Heisenberg ba, ni hui jue de zi ji shi zai de yun she ting xiang sheng.

SL:Howard: You're nitpicking.

TL: Ni tai chui mao qiu chi le!

SL:Sheldon: Oh, really? Well here is another nit for you.

TL:Shi ma? Na wo jiu zai lai tiao yi xia ci.

In the example above, Sheldon says: "Agreed. Wait till you hear how he dumbs down Werner Heisenberg for the crowd. You may actually believe you're in a comedy club". And this is translated into "Mei cuo, ni dne zhe ting ta gen da jia hu che Werner Heisenberg ba, ni hui jue de zi ji shi zai de yun she ting xiang sheng."

When seeing this translation, the Chinese audience can understand Sheldon's meaning. They know from "De yun she xiang sheng" that Sheldon means that the person is just talking nonsense.

#### 4. Conclusion

Under the guidance of Skopos Theory, this paper brings forward four strategies: literal translation, comment-making, web language, classical Chinese and dialects. It is no doubt that translation of humor in subtitles is a complicated task. Therefore, there is no perfect translated version. However, these strategies enable us to improve our translation. I have to say that there exist several limitations in my thesis. We hope that the research can make more people contribute to the study of humor translation and promote the development of this field. I would like to suggest that surveys can be conducted on the internet to collect the opinions of the audience and their feelings about different versions of subtitle translation.

#### References

- [1] Cay Dollerup, *On Subtitles in Television Programs* [A]. *Babel*, 1974(20): 197-202.
- [2] Delabastita, D. *Translation and Mass-communication: Film and TV Translation as Evidence of Culture*. [A]. *Babel* 35(4). 193-218, 1989.
- [3] De Linde and Neil Kay. *The Semiotics of Subtitling* [A]. *Manchester: St Edmundsbury Press Ltd*, 1999.
- [4] Gambier, Yves & Gottlieb, Henrik (eds). *(Multi) Media Translation: Concepts, Practices and Research*[M]. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2001.