

Original Paper

A Study of Humorous Subtitle Translation of *the Big Bang Theory* From the Perspective of the Translation Variation Theory

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Abstract

Under the background of economic globalization, British and American movies and TV series have become one of the important ways of cultural exchange and communication between China and the west, and subtitle translation also plays an increasingly important role in cross-cultural communication. Taking the American sitcom "the Big Bang Theory" as an example, its language is characterized by humor and personality. This paper first summarizes the characteristics of subtitle translation of sitcoms, then analyzes the types of humor translation from three aspects: general humor, cultural humor and linguistic humor, and then analyzes the specific examples of "addition, subtraction, compilation and modification" to investigate the guiding role of translation variation theory in subtitle translation.

Keywords

translation variation theory, humorous subtitle translation, the Big Bang Theory

1. Introduction

With the booming development of the Internet, cultural exchanges between countries have been significantly enhanced. As a popular social media, film and television works play an active role in the dissemination and exchange of cultures among different countries. Therefore, film and television subtitle translation has become one of the key factors for the success of film and television works. The quality of subtitle translation directly affects the communication effect of film works, while the difficulty of subtitle translation lies in how to accurately convey the original meaning, maintain the style of the original text, and meet the cultural customs and needs of the target culture.

The Big Bang Theory is a beloved American sitcom that attracts a large audience with its sense of humor and heartwarming story. The work delves into themes of friendship, love, and careers through the hilarious lives of Sheldon, Leonard, and their friends. Since *The Big Bang Theory* was introduced into China's online TV series, it has been widely followed by audiences. Its funny plot and vivid characters have generated laughter and praise from its viewers.

Based on the translation variation theory and the classification of humorous texts, this paper will analyze the Chinese version of *the Big Bang Theory* and explore the translation strategies of humorous texts. By analyzing the language characteristics, cultural differences and audience needs in subtitle translation, this paper discusses some effective translation methods and strategies to accurately convey the intention of the original text, maintain the style of the original text, and meet the cultural customs of the target culture and the needs of the audience.

2. Literature Review

In the 1990s, film and television subtitle translation in China has gradually developed vigorously, and people's attention to film and television subtitle translation has changed. Many translators and scholars have published relevant academic articles. Professor Li Yunxing proposed: "The characteristics and corresponding translation strategies of subtitle translation are analyzed from three aspects: spatial and temporal constraints, information functions and cultural factors". Ma Zhengqi has also elaborated on film and television translation from different aspects in a number of academic articles. *The Translation and Aesthetic Characteristics of Film and Television Scripts* summarizes the current situation of domestic film and television translation. In *A Discussion on Methods of Film and Television*, the characteristics of the translated language of film and television works are expounded, which are different from other forms of translation, and then the basic characteristics, thinking mode and creative means of film and television translation are analyzed, and the methods of film and television translation are discussed from these three aspects.

Since the modernization process of the West is earlier, the degree of economic and cultural openness is higher, so the emergence and popularization of film and television is relatively fast. Its research has been extensive and in-depth, and has formed a systematic theoretical system, including the specific characteristics, skills, principles, and translation standards of film and television translation. In 1974,

Dollerup published an article *On Subtitles in Television Programmes on Babel*, which was the first study on subtitle translation. The article briefly introduces the different problems existing in film and television translation, which is highly concerned. In 1992, Swedish Subtitling translator Ivarsson published *Subtitling for the Media: A Handbook of an Art*, the first comprehensive study of subtitle translation in Europe, which describe in detail the development of subtitle translation (Kangle, 2007, p. 82). Ivarsson's book laid the foundation for the study of film and television translation. Since then, Western research theory also increased significantly.

At present, most of the studies on humor translation in *The Big Bang Theory* focus on the strategies and methods of subtitle translation from the perspectives of skopos theory, relevance theory, functional equivalence theory and ecological translation, while there are very few studies on subtitle translation from the perspective of translation variation theory. Therefore, this paper chooses to explore the subtitle translation of *The Big Bang Theory* from the perspective of translation variation theory.

3. Translation Variation Theory

Since the 1990s, there has been a cultural shift in translation studies. Western scholars put forward that "translation is not carried out in a vacuum, and cultural factors have a huge influence on translators." They regard translation as "rewriting" and "manipulating", prompting the translation community to delve deeper into the extra-textual factors affecting the translator's translation process. Professor Huang Zhonglian put forward the translation variation theory in 1999, which is an original translation theory system in the Chinese translation circle. Traditional translation theories mainly focus on "total translation", that is, translators try their best to reduce the loss of the original content and the change of the macro form on the basis of preserving the content and form of the original work. In contrast, "translation variation theory" emphasizes the use of flexible means to absorb the original content according to the special needs of specific readers under specific conditions.

In 2002, Professor Huang Zhonglian further summarized the essence of translation variation theory: "The essence is the translation activity in which the translator absorbs the relevant content of the original text by means of addition, deletion, edition, narration, condensation, combination and adaptation according to the special needs of specific readers under specific conditions." By applying the translation variation theory to subtitle translation, the original text can be transformed through eight means of variation, so as to meet the needs of specific audiences to obtain humor. At this point, the theory plays an irreplaceable role in the translation effect.

This paper will use four translation strategies of the variation translation theory: addition, deletion, edition and adaptation, to analyze the humorous translation. Through the application of these strategies, we can better understand how to fully convey the humorous effect and meet the needs of specific audiences while retaining the meaning of the original text. At the same time, it will help us to further explore the application and practical value of translation theory in humorous text translation.

4. Characteristics of Sitcom Subtitle Translation

Sitcom subtitle translation is a unique form of linguistic adaptation that requires a deft handling of humor, cultural nuances, and viewer comprehension. It involves capturing the comedic essence of the original script while adapting it to a new linguistic and cultural context. Given the limitations of space and time in subtitles, precision and conciseness are paramount. Additionally, subtitle translators must consider the target audience's language preferences and cultural background to ensure the humor and messaging are effectively communicated. This demands not only linguistic proficiency but also cultural sensitivity and a keen understanding of how humor translates across different cultural boundaries.

4.1 Time-Space Constraint

The display time of the subtitle translation on the screen is only 1-2 seconds, and it disappears instantly with the change of the picture and the sound of the actor. Unlike literature, the audience does not have enough time to pore over the subtitles. In order not to block the screen, subtitles are placed at the bottom of the screen, with each line does not exceed 30 characters, and the total number of lines does not exceed two lines. The translator needs to convey all the information to the audience completely in the limited time and space.

4.2 Popularity

The second characteristic of subtitle translation is popularity. Most of the content in film and television subtitle translation is the character's dialogue or monologue, which are colloquial. Sitcom is a comedy performance form with a wide audience and popular content, so its subtitle translation should be popular and easy to understand. Audiences of different cultural backgrounds, education levels and ages all favor sitcoms, and only elegant and popular subtitle translation can meet the needs of the public.

4.3 Humor

The humor of sitcom subtitle translation is one of the key factors to attract the audience. By using concise language style, handling of cultural factors, language innovation and transformation of expression, translators can effectively convey the humor of the original work and make the audience better enjoy the joy brought by sitcoms. The dialogue of *The Big Bang Theory* uses a lot of rhetorical devices such as exaggeration, puns and irony to express humor, so subtitle translation should convey the humorous information in the dialogue to the audience.

5. Humorous Translation in *The Big Bang Theory*

Schmitz divides humorous texts into three categories: universal humor, linguistic humor, and cultural humor. Translators need to adopt different translation strategies when translating different types of humor.

5.1 Universal Humor

Universal humor does not contain cultural elements or rhetorical devices, its humorous effects come from plots or actual antics. It is not limited by region, ethnicity, cultural background, gender and race, so audience without specific cultural background can understand it. Ensuring the correct grammar of

the target language, the translator can use literal translation to retain the original meaning and rhetoric devices, and the sentence structure can be adjusted according to the grammatical norms of the target language.

Example 1:

ST: Leonard: How do you get the entire lecture hall to flip you off at the same time?

Howard: Apparently, if you're Sheldon all you need to do is turn your back.

TT: 莱纳德: 怎么才能让整个教室的人同时朝你竖中指呢?

霍华德: 显然, 如果是 Sheldon, 只要转身背对着他们就行了。

Analysis: Sheldon was invited to give a speech to high-achieving students at a university. However, due to his arrogance, he was ridiculed by his students. At this time, Leonard and Howard were reading the students' comments. Leonard didn't believe that students lose interest in him. But Howard thought it was funny, and he responded to the question in a different way than Leonard. This kind of humor is similar to an intellectual game, and Chinese audiences can quickly understand its meaning without much explanation. In this example, the translator only needs to translate the humor directly in the sentence and retain the original form, so that the humorous effect can be accurately and fully displayed.

5.2 Cultural Humor

Cultural humor is transmitted through expressions or allusions with cultural connotations. Due to different cultural backgrounds of the audience, cultural humor is more difficult to translate, and cultural reference is a common cause of humorous subtitle translation problems. Cultural references are defined as specific terms of popular culture that refer to ideas, opinions, attitudes, and other phenomena formed through informal consensus within mainstream groups in society. If the audience does not know these specific terms, they may not understand the humor. It is therefore the translator's responsibility to break down this barrier by either explaining what is referred to or substituting terms from the target culture to ensure that the original humor is fully understood and appreciated by the audience.

Example 2:

ST: Phil: Sorry, Dude. It's on the calendar.

TT: 菲尔: 抱歉, 老弟。板上钉钉了。

Analysis: After Luke shoots and kills his sister Alex with a toy gun, his parents Claire and Phil are furious and plan to punish him severely. They decided to revenge Luke in the same way. When Luke shows remorse, Phil coldly tells him, "It's on the calendar." It is an expression in American culture. Most Americans make a habit of marking their calendars, usually with pins. So the phrase "It's on the calendar" means that something is already scheduled and cannot be changed.

However, in the context of Chinese culture, there is an old saying "hammering nails on a board", which is also used to describe things that are settled and cannot be changed. When translating such humor with cultural characteristics, in order to ensure that the target audience can get the same humorous experience as the original audience, the translator should adopt the strategy of dynamic equivalence. Thus, the humorous effect of the original sentence is preserved, while ensuring that the audience can

easily understand its meaning.

5.3 Linguistic Humor

Linguistic humor includes the use of linguistic skills and rhetorical devices, which are expressed through metaphors, puns and other rhetorical devices. However, the use of rhetoric, syntax, and vocabulary varies widely in different languages. If translators sacrifice the form too much in order to convey the content, they may lose the humorous effect of the original text. Therefore, the translator can deal with the conflict between form and content by substituting elements to find a close and natural target text.

Example 3:

ST: Phil: What if we took the R... You kidding me?!

TT: 菲尔: 不如我们开房车....你在逗我吗?

Analysis: While Phil and Claire are discussing vacation plans and deciding which car to drive, an ironic thing suddenly happens. Phil is about to say the word "RV" when an accident occurs: an RV slips and crashes into a nearby tree. Phil cleverly uses the similar-sounding word "are" instead of "R," thus turning the original "RV" into "Are you kidding me?" . This kind of verbal humor is mainly achieved through pronunciation and puns, and it requires the translator to deeply understand the punchline and look for similar expressions in the target language. In the translation, "drive" has a dual meaning, both to drive a vehicle and to joke. Although this expression sacrifices the clarity of the original word "R", it is more in line with the language habits of the target audience and helps them better appreciate the humor of the original sentence.

6. Examples of the Translation Variation Theory in *The Big Bang Theory*

The following text will analyze the humorous text in *The Big Bang Theory* from the four aspects: addition, deletion, edition and adaptation. And the paper will analyze how the translator skillfully uses the above four strategies to translate the original humor vividly.

6.1 Addition

Professor Huang Zhonglian believes that addition refers to add information on the basis of the original text, and the translator supplements the information in order to make the audience better understand the meaning of the original subtitle. It can be divided into three means: interpretation, commentary and writing. Interpretation refers to interpret or annotate content that is difficult to understand or unclear in the original text. Commentary refers to comment or evaluate the ideas or facts in the original text; Writing refers to supplementing or exerting the missing or insufficient content in the original text.

Example 1:

ST: (before he read Penny's paper)

Leonard: Please be good, please be good.

(after he read Penny's paper)

Leonard: Okay, she writes like she cooks.

TT: (在读佩妮的论文前)

莱纳德: “拜托是篇好论文, 拜托是篇好论文。”

(在读佩妮的论文后)

莱纳德: “好吧, 她写作像煮饭一样烂。”

Analysis: The translation of this paragraph cleverly uses addition twice. That night, when Penny and Leonard share the terrible pasta she made by hand, she tells Leonard that she is studying at college in order to fulfill her dream of going to college. Recently, she had to hand in her first paper on slavery. Leonard offered to help her write her paper, but she didn't want him to involve in. So when Penny fell asleep, Leonard couldn't resist getting up and sneaking out of the room to look at Penny's paper. Before turning on the computer, he wished everything to be all right with the paper, so he said "please be good" in English, which should actually be "please be a good paper". The translator adopted the method of addition, adding the object to make the sentence more complete and orderly. The audience doesn't have to read the previous episode to understand what Leonard is saying. In addition, after Leonard read Penny's paper, he said, "She writes like she cooks." The translator also used addition, the audience may not know how well Penny cooks, but by adding the word "bad", the audience can know the quality of her paper.

Example 2:

ST: Raj: Yeah. well. I don't like bugs. okay? They freak me out.

Sheldon: Interesting! You're afraid of insects and women. Ladybugs must render you catatonic.

TT: 拉吉: 哼, 是的。我不喜欢虫子。这又怎么啦? 它们让我害怕。

谢尔顿: 有趣, 你既害怕虫子又害怕女人,那瓢虫(英文: 女士+虫)还不得把你给吓晕了。

Analysis: Raj has selective aphasia, an inability to speak in the presence of girls. So when he showed his fear of insects in the insect lab, Shelton used the word "ladybug" to make fun of him. In English, ladybug is a compound of the words "lady" and "bug", which Sheldon uses to mock Lucky for being afraid of both women and insects. However, if "ladybug" is directly translated into Chinese, it cannot achieve the similar humorous effect of the source text because of the different characteristics of Chinese characters and English words. In order to make the Chinese audience feel the same humor, the translator used the "interpretation" in the translation method, and added a note after the "ladybug", indicating "English: lady + bug", so that the audience can understand the formation of the word and Shelton's mocking intention. Through such translation and annotation, the audience can not only understand Raj's fear and Sheldon's teasing, but also feel the similar humorous effects in Chinese and English culture. This approach can better convey the context and humor of the original work, and enhance the audience's viewing experience.

6.2 Deletion

Reduction refers to the overall removal of extra information content in the original text that the translator thinks the reader does not need. Compared with Chinese expression habits, English is more straightforward, concise and clear. In order to make the translation more suitable to the cultural habits

of the readers, translators usually reduce the original text without changing the original meaning, so as to improve the efficiency and quality of translation and make the translation more fluent.

Example 3:

ST: Holy crap. It's like Silence of the Lambs down here. (Howard touched his shoulder suddenly from behind and he screamed) Don't do that.

TT: 我的天啊，这块儿简直就像《沉默的羔羊》。不要那样！

Analysis: In the above example, the elements in parentheses are transition words. Due to the simultaneous appearance of the picture, music, dialogue, and other information, for the Chinese audience with a high level of education and strong reading ability, this information is enough to explain clearly. Therefore, for these words, we can adopt the strategy of deletion. English works often have a lot of asides, which describe the expressions or movements of the characters when they speak. When viewers watch, they already receive this information through the screen, so there is no need to repeat it in the subtitles. Through the effective use of the deletion strategy included in the translation variation theory, we can greatly reduce the lines of subtitles, so as to better meet the requirements of concise.

Example 4:

ST: Leonard: Oh, he's trying to make a new friend.

Penny: Oh, really? Well, good for him.

Leonard: Well, unless he makes one out of the wood like Geppetto, I don't think it's gonna happen.

TT: 莱纳德：他想交个新朋友

佩妮：是嘛，很好啊

莱纳德：除非他用木头做一个，不然我看是不可能了

Analysis: The word "Geppetto" is a fictional character who carves out a wooden puppet named Pinocchio. The Chinese audiences are quite familiar with Pinocchio, while the name Geppetto does not ring much of a bell. If it is translated literally, the audience may get confused about the implication of this particular name. If given annotation, the subtitle would consume more of the audience's time. Given that Leonard's emphasis in this dialogue is on the exquisite craftsmanship of wood products, similar to Geppetto's work, the actual significance of the name Geppetto is not highlighted here. Despite minor loss of cultural information, the audience is granted more time to enjoy the humorous flavor.

6.3 Edition

Edition is to adjust the sentence structure and word order of the article according to the needs of the readers, which not only makes the translation more in line with the language habits of the target readers, but also makes the translation more logical. The difference between English and Chinese language structures is manifested in the fact that Chinese uses more parallel structures, while English tends to use subordination structures. Therefore, it is necessary for translators to use edition while translation according to the language habits of the target readers.

Example 5:

ST: I hope that isn't one of the animals that your people think is magic

TT: 我希望你们那里，不会把他当做神圣的动物

Analysis: If translated word-by-word, the target text would be "我希望那不是你们视为神奇动物的一种", but the translator reorganized the whole sentence to make the translation more natural and smooth. By splitting the original sentence into two sentences, the audience is able to understand the meaning of the sentence more easily and thus better follow the speed of the subtitles. The use of edition not only improves the readability of the translation, but also helps the audience to better immerse themselves in the plot and enjoy the fun of watching.

6.4 Adaptation

Adaptation is an activity that changes the form or part of the original content or even the style of the original work according to specific requirements. (Huang Zhonglian, 2014:97). As an domestication approach, adaptation can meet the needs of specific audiences. Therefore, subtitle translators often use adaptation to achieve effective transformation of two cultures, so that the audience can quickly understand the target text.

Example 6:

ST: Howard: What's with him?

Sheldon: Perhaps he's at a sensitive point in his monthly cycle.

Howard: Are you saying he's man-starting?

TT: 霍华德:他什么毛病?

谢尔顿:也许他正处于每个月一次的敏感期。

霍华德:你是说他“大姨父”来了?

Analysis: Sheldon and Howard are discussing the possibility of giant ants while Leonard comes out of his room frustrated. Howard asks Sheldon what's wrong with Leonard, and Sheldon thinks Leonard has bad days every month. Then Howard misunderstands Sheldon and asks, "Are you saying he's man-starting?" The word "man-starting" itself actually means "menstruation", but in order to make the Chinese audience better understand the meaning of the sitcom, and because people in China usually call "menstruation" as "dayima", the translator translated it into the Internet popular word "dayifu". Such a translation uses the method of adaptation, which is faithful to the original text, but also describes the sentences clearly without losing humor, so that the Chinese audience can better understand.

Example 7:

ST: What's up, Shel-Bot?

TT: 怎么了，谢童木?

Analysis: Sheldon wanted to survive before humans are able to transfer their consciousness into machines in order to achieve immortality, so he would like to use a virtual instrument to act in his place, and himself hid in his bedroom. That's when the avatars knocked on Penny's door. The name "Shel-Bot" is a contraction of "Sheldon" and "robot". The translator did not adopt a literal translation,

but adopted a adaptation translation strategy, replacing the neutral word "robot" with the animation image "Astro Boy" familiar to Chinese audiences, and translated it into "Xie Astro Boy". Such a translation is both vivid and cute, in line with Sheldon's character image and personality. The translation immediately narrowed the psychological distance between the work and the Chinese audience, so that the Chinese audience can easily understand the scene and have a strong sense of identity.

7. Conclusion

The translation variation theory subverts traditional translation ideas and aims to pursue "flexibility", that is, to find the best way to convey information and reduce the burden of translators on the basis of meeting the needs of target readers. It is the various translation methods that enable the variation translation theory to guide the study of different texts. Based on the particularity of subtitle translation, this paper uses the translation variation theory to analyze the application of four flexible means of "addition, deletion, edition and adaptation" in subtitle translation of the Big Bang Theory, and proves that the translation variation theory plays a guiding role in subtitle translation, which can improve the quality of subtitle translation and enable the audience to obtain information efficiently. The theory can also help disseminate the cultural characteristics and ideological connotations contained in the original works, and promote cultural communication and exchange.

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