

Original Paper

The Humor Translation in American Sitcoms from the Perspective of Skopos Theory —A Case Study of Modern Family

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Abstract

With the frequent cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries, film and television series, not only gradually replace the mainstream position of traditional print media, but also play a very important role in cross-cultural communication. It is difficult to convey the same comic effect in different cultural backgrounds. Guided by Skopos theory, this paper takes the subtitle translation of Modern Family as an example to analyze the translation of some humorous lines in this sitcom. It aims to achieve the effect of integration, hoping to put forward more opinions on the subtitle translation of more excellent overseas comedy works in the future.

Keywords

Modern family, Sitcom, Translation, Skopos theory

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Humor is a unique way of human communication, which has always been welcomed by the public. The popularity of the Internet has also gradually brought excellent American TV series resources into the vision of Chinese audiences. The show was named Time magazine's "Favorite Family Comedy of the Year" and has received critical acclaim from viewers around the world (Poniewozick, 2009, pp. 26-29). "Modern" in "Modern Family" can be understood as "modern" and "trendy". The new trend here mainly refers to the new trend of their family model, because their extended family covers all possible family structures in today's society, and different family models have derived different ideas and lifestyles (Ma Yongchao, 2016, p. 1). The idiomatic expression and funny plot of sitcoms have become the first choice of this group. Skopos Theory is one of the most influential theories in the field of

translation.

1.2 Purpose and Significance

This paper mainly studies the translation of verbal humor in sitcoms. The translation of humor is also a difficult translation. The translation of lines seems to be the conversion of two languages, but people living in different cultural backgrounds have different understandings of humor. This paper hopes to provide feasible references for students who learn foreign languages through film and television works.

2. Theoretical Foundation

2.1 Overview of Skopos theory

The development of Skopos theory was mainly led by the German scholar Tarina Reiss and the representative of the German functionalist school Hans Vermeer. In the first stage, Tarina Rice founded the Skopos theory of translation and put forward theory of text types for the first time in her book. In the second stage, Hans Vermeer put forward "Skopos" in his book "General Translation Theory", which is what we call "Skopos Theory". He believes that translation should be based on the original text and guided by a certain purpose. At the same time, whether this goal is achieved is also regarded as the criterion for judging the translation (Zhang Dongdong, 2020, pp. 97-98).

Hans Vermeer broke the shackles of the original-centered theory and proposed the concept of translation commission, that is, the translator decides whether, when and how to complete the translation task (Hans J Vermeer, 1989). Skopos theory provides a good explanation for the debates on domestication and foreignization, formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence.

2.2 The Brief Introduction of Humor Translation

The research on humor has been going on for a long time, but the history of combining humor with translation is not long. At the beginning of the research in this direction in China, scholars mainly focused on the analysis of the types of humor texts (Chen Jiabin, 2019, p. 4). The broad sense of humor includes various forms of humor, such as comedy, cartoon, humor, etc. However, the narrow sense of humor only refers to humorous words (Gao Shenglin, 2006, pp. 100-104). Humorous language translation can convey happiness to people living in different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, the study of humorous language translation has been paid more and more attention in the field of cross-cultural communication (Wang Nan, 1984, p. 26).

3. The Application of Skopos Theory in *Modern Family* Humor Translation

In order to ensure that the translation of humorous elements in sitcoms can not only be faithful to the source language, but also reproduce these humorous elements in the target language environment, translators should be flexible under the guidance of Skopos theory, and choose the most appropriate translation strategies and methods according to the needs of translation (Liu Tianyu & Song Hongbo, 2023, pp. 32-35).

3.1 Replace Unfamiliar Concepts

In the process of traditional subtitling, the translator should make the humorous words in the original text fully reflect in the translation according to the principle.

Example 1 Season 1 Episode 15

Jay: Come on. He is been on Johnny Carson a hundred times.

Gloria: Who the hell is Johnny Carson?

杰：拜托！他上过无数次《鲁豫有约》了。

歌洛莉亚：鲁豫又是谁？

As Valentine's Day approaches, Jay and Gloria plan how to spend the holiday. Jay wants them to watch a talk show together. But Gloria doesn't know who the humorist is, and Jay is shocked and introduces the man as having appeared on Johnny Carson (a famous American presenter)'s show many times. Instead of adding a note to explain the new name, the translator replaced it with a similar program in China.

3.2 Highlight the Character Characteristics

The characters in sitcoms usually have distinct personalities and characteristics, and in the modern family. The generation of humorous phrases in sitcoms is related to the characteristics of characters, and the same sentences can only be effective if spoken by specific characters.

Example 2 Season 1 Episode 14

Michell: Okay. Maybe, uh, we should go over the accident one more time.

Gloria: Put the dogs on a row. You are such a good lawyer.

米歇尔：我们来回顾一下车祸的情形吧。

歌洛莉亚：一丝不“狗”地分析，你真是个好律师啊。

Gloria is Colombian American, so she is not very familiar with some of the pronunciation and usage of English. In the play, Gloria wants to say "put the ducks on a row (一丝不苟)", but instead she says "put the dogs on a row (一丝不狗)". That's a word error, or what we call "包袱". The translator used annotations to explain it, and the content of annotations achieves the effect of homophone equivalence.

3.3 Add in-text Comments

Since the content of humor in film and television is based on national culture, not all cultural differences can be transmitted through substitution or translation. Therefore, when translators are unable to use translation methods, they will add notes in the text to explain the connotation of some lines succinctly and to achieve the purpose of conveying the original content to the audience.

Example 3 Season 1 Episode 14

Dylan: Well, Haley and I got into another fight.

Phil: Oh, say Anything.

Dylan: Um, morning?

Phil: No, Dylan, *Say Anything*. Clutch movie.

迪兰：海莉又跟我闹了。

菲尔：哦，《情到深处》的场景啊（说点什么吧）

迪兰：额，早上好？

菲尔：不，迪兰，《情到深处》，经典电影。

Here, Phil's daughter's boyfriend Dylan is standing in front of the house early in the morning with his phone held up. After Phil asks about the situation, he complains that the scene is just like the movie. And the title of the film left Dylan confused. Without annotations, the audience would have expressed the same doubts as Dylan.

4. Conclusion

The three application rules are to replace unfamiliar concepts, highlight character characteristics, and add in-text comments. These three rules are often reflected in the subtitle translation of American sitcoms represented by *Modern Family*. But there are still some shortcomings in this paper. It is not that teleology does not provide specific directions. In addition, the above examples are selected and analyzed by the author, which is bound to be one-sided and not rigorous enough. Therefore, we can build a corpus of certain sitcoms according to the audience's preferences or their own learning direction in the future. We can also compare and analyze the versions with more viewers, and compare the translation theories and translation methods used in different versions.

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