Personalized Subtitle Translation of The Big Bang Theory

Beth Rillera

3273795311@qq.com

Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, 200083, China

Abstract

Nowadays, with the accelerating process of globalization as the carrier of culture, films and TV series, especially TV sitcoms, play a more vital role in the spread of culture and attract a remarkably increasing number of audiences. Along with the broadening of the audience, the demand for high quality subtitle translation is also increasing. This paper attempts to provide personalized subtitle translation that fits the character's identity, personality, and speaking scene, which is based on the popular sitcom "The Big Bang Theory".

Keywords: Subtitle translation; Personalized dialogue; The Big Bang Theory;

1. Introduction

In recent years, films and TV series have played an important role in information dissemination and cultural exchange. Subtitle translation, an important tool for understanding the contents of films and TV series, has gradually drawn attention in the translation field. However, the restrictions on subtitle translation and the cultural differences between China and other western countries have posed challenges to the field of subtitle translation. In order to resolve this situation, translating theories and strategies were needed and adopted. Therefore, this paper aims to focus on the importance and application of strategies implemented in subtitle translation, through an analysis of the features and characteristics of subtitle translation based on the lines of the American popular sitcom "The Big Bang Theory".

2. The definition of subtitle translation

The study of subtitle translation started in the 1950s in European countries when some European scholars began to publish some articles about how to improve the quality of subtitle translation. Since China opened itself to the outside world some forty years ago, therefore the research of subtitle translation in China was left far behind.

Shuttleworth and Cowie defined subtitle translation as "the process of providing synchronous instructions for films and television dialogues". In the meantime, they've pointed out that there were two ways to translate foreign films and television works: dubbing and subtitle translation. Dubbing is the auditory supplement to film's source languages. While subtitle translation is a visual supplement to the transmission of film information, In this paper, we will focus on the improvement of the subtitle translation.

Subtitle translation refers to the process of translating the source language into a target language that can be understood and accepted by the target audience. Due to the cultural differences between western and eastern countries, this process does not simply involve the conversion or translating process of two languages, but also involves the transmission and transplantation of culture carried by the dialogues, which serve as supplemental information for the audience during the viewing of the film or TV series. In order to provide the audience with a wonderful viewing experience, the translator has adopted various translation strategies, such as domestication, foreignization, annotation, and etc.

3. The constraints of subtitle translation

Subtitles are text derived from either a transcript or screenplay of the dialog or commentary in films, television programs, video games, and was usually displayed at the bottom of the screen, but can also be at the top of the screen if there is already text at the bottom of the screen. They can either be a form of written translation of a dialog in a foreign language, or a written rendering of the dialog in the same language, with or without added information to help viewers who are deaf or hard of hearing to follow the dialog, or people who cannot understand the spoken dialogue or who have accent recognition problems.

Aside form the above features, the characteristics of the subtitles include "listening, comprehensiveness, instantaneous, popularity and no-annotation" (Qian Shaocang, 2000). Due to these natural features and characteristics, the translation of subtitles were faced with various constraints.

Subtitle translation is usually constrained by many factors, Mayoral, Kelly and Gallardo (from Diaz-Cintas, 1999) divided these factors into six categories: time, space, music, image and spoken language. While,

Li Yunxing, a Chinese scholar pointed out that subtitle translation is mainly constrained by two factors, which is time and space (Li Yunxing, 2001:38).

3.1 Time constraint

In the process of subtitle translation, the subtitle must cooperate with the sound and image to completely transmit the content of the film or TV series. In other words, the sound, image, and subtitles need to be synchronized in order to completely and successfully transmit the information desired to be delivered by the film or TV series, which also greatly challenges the translation of subtitles.

The duration of the sound will be determined by the change of the image, and the length of the subtitle will be determined by the duration of the sound. Therefore, the translator needs to strictly control the length of the subtitle to ensure that it won't be too complicated and informative, resulting in the audience's inability to comprehend the content in a short amount of time. In the meantime, it shouldn't be too short and concise, which might undermine the coherence of the storey plot. In addition, the length of the subtitle shouldn't be less than 2 to 3 seconds (Li Yunxing, 2001:38). However, an audience from different countries possesses different reading speeds, comprehension abilities, and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, translators need to adopt different translation theories and strategies flexibly and come up with the best subtitles that meet the demands of the target audience.

3.2 Space constraint

The subtitle usually appears in one or two lines at the foot of the screen simultaneously with the dialogue or narration going on in the source language. This helps the audience better understand the obscure contents or segments in the film. For people with hearing disabilities, subtitle translation undoubtedly plays a key role. Under such circumstances, the translation of subtitles faced great challenges. Li Yunxing pointed out that the space limit refers to the number of language symbols that can be displayed on the screen, which is sometimes one line or two lines. In addition, the number of words can be slightly different depending on the country (Li Yunxing, 2001:38).

Subtitles usually appear in the narrow space at the bottom of the screen, which cannot be contained with too many language symbols, so as not to affect the effect of the film, as well as the viewing experience of the

audience. Therefore, no matter how complex the content is, it is necessary for the translator to control the number of language symbols without affecting the image of the films or TV series. "The Big Bang Theory" translation project requires a maximum of 20 Chinese characters per line. Therefore, the translator has adopted different translation strategies such as condensing, compressing, and deleting to meet the required number of language symbols allowed to be displayed on the screen, so as to provide the audience with the best viewing experience.

4. The personalized dialogue

Nowadays, with the arrival of the information age, cross-cultural exchanges between countries have become more frequent. Foreign films and TV series, as the carriers of culture, play a vital role in the process of cultural exchange. Subtitle translation, as an important tool for understanding the contents of a film or TV series, is gradually attracting more attention in the translation field. Nevertheless, due to the natural features and characteristics of the subtitles, subtitle translation was faced with great challenges. To resolve this situation, translators tend to adopt translation theories and strategies during the translation process of subtitles, such as domestication, foreignization, and annotation. However, most of these theories and strategies focus on reproducing the cultural content carried by the dialogue or trying to come up with translations that suit the needs of the viewer. Therefore, most of the theories and strategies adopted actually ignored the importance of the character's identity, personality, and speaking scene in the translation process of the subtitles.

The character's language plays an essential role in the creation of the individual's personality. In the meantime, the characters of foreign films and TV series, especially American sitcoms, attract audiences with their distinctive personalities. Therefore, the characters' language in the films and TV series shall not be alike or even sound the same.

Every character in the film or TV series usually expresses their personality and characteristics through the words that he or she utters, which is "words are the voice of the heart". In other words, we can say that "what the heart thinks, the tongue speaks". Although people may speak insincerely at times, the inner world, metal activities, and personal characteristics of each individual can be continuously or unconsciously revealed through the words that they utter. For this reason, the producers of films and TV series usually attract audiences through the creation of distinctive character personalities and humorous lines. Therefore, how to

faithfully reproduce the personalized language of every character has become one of the major challenges in subtitle translation.

5. The Big Bang Theory

The American sitcom "The Big Bang Theory" tells the funny life storey of four scientists and one pretty neighbor. Leonard Hofstadter and Sheldon Cooper are both brilliant physicists working at Cal Tech in Pasadena, California. They are colleagues, best friends, and roommates, although in all capacities, their relationship is always tested primarily by Sheldon's regimented, deeply eccentric, and non-conventional ways. They are also friends with their Cal Tech colleagues, mechanical engineer Howard Wolowitz and astrophysicist Rajesh Koothrappali. The foursome spend their time working on their individual work projects, playing video games, watching science-fiction movies, or reading comic books. Since they are self-professed nerds, they all have little or no luck with women. When Penny, a pretty woman and an aspiring actress from Omaha, moves into the apartment across the hall from Leonard and Sheldon's, Leonard has another aspiration in life, namely to get Penny to be his girlfriend.

This American sitcom attracts audiences with its humorous plot, interesting lines, as well as the distinctive personalities and characteristics of each and every role involved in the storey plot. Numerous online fan-sub organizations in China translated the sitcom for educational purposes, personal interest, etc. As one of the members of the online fan-sub group, this paper aims to analyse the line in "The Big Bang Theory", taking into consideration the importance of the character's identity, personality, and speaking scene during the process of subtitle translation, so as to come up with high-quality subtitles that meet the demand of the audience.

The translation of the character's language shall be in line with reality. In other words, the words uttered by each and every character in the original text should suit their own identity, personality, and speaking scene, and the translation shall be the same.

5.1 Translation in line with character's identity

As we all know, people from different social backgrounds, with different identities, come with different

speaking habits. For instance, government officials and literary scholars both come with high social status, so they often seem to be very cautious about what they say, and they are also afraid of making mistakes with their words, which might damage their image. On the other hand, people with low social status, farmers, and labourer often speak freely. To sum up, most people's speaking habits were more or less affected by their social status.

"The Big Bang Theory" tells the funny stories that happen between four brilliant scientists and one pretty neighbor. The age, gender, identity, background, as well as the social status of the main characters in this sitcom display great differences. Therefore, their speaking habits were also bound to be different.

The translator's task is to provide the audience with subtitles that help them quickly and effectively grasp the storey plot, as well as the character's personality, sentiments, and inner world. However, this created a great challenge for the translator. To resolve this, the translator must have a comprehensive and systematic understanding of the character's identity, personality, and speaking scene, and have the knowledge or ability to use the words and terms flexibly to come up with translations that will fully reflect the character's speaking habits.

For example:

Original text: (Season 5, Episode 1)
Sheldon: Penny could have been inspecting Raj's anal region for parasites.
Sheldon: Oh, boy. That's a true blue friend.
Leonard: They slept together, Sherlock.

Translation 1：
Sheldon: Penny 可能是在观测 Raj 的菊花有没有寄生虫。
Sheldon: 天呐，真是位称职的蓝颜知己。
Leonard: 他们上床了，大神探。

Translation 2：
Sheldon: Penny 可能是在观测 Raj 的肛门部有没有寄生虫。
Sheldon: 天呐，真不愧为麻吉

Leonard: 他们上床了，福尔摩斯。

Storyline:

Penny and Raj slept together. They bumped into Sheldon, Howard, and Leonard in the morning, so Penny told them "It's not what it looks like". Sheldon has a very low EQ. He is confused about what Penny said in the morning. He is curious about what happened last night with Penny and Raj. Therefore, he suggests that Penny might be helping Raj in checking his anal region for parasites, but Leonard can't bear it anymore and just told Sheldon they slept together.

Analysis:

Sheldon is a highly educated theoretical physicist with two doctorates. So, based on how he grew up, how much he has learned, and how well he is known, he will choose to use formal words rather than slightly indecent words. In the meantime, Sheldon has also developed a more formal speaking habit. The above translation was "菊花 and 肛门部". Taking into consideration Sheldon's identity and social status, translation 2 better suits the speaking habits of Sheldon. In the meantime, it also helps the audience quickly understand the personality of Sheldon.

5.2 Translation in line with character's personality

Generally, every person's speaking habits can reflect their characteristics and personalities. Therefore, people with different growing backgrounds and lifestyles come with different personalities and characteristics. Some people like to go straight to the theme, while others like to beat around the bush; some like to show off their knowledge and speak mysteriously, while others act modestly and are discreet about their words; some speak eloquently, while others speak cautiously; some speak fluently, while others speak poorly; and some speak elegantly, while others speak rudely.

"The Big Bang Theory" is a typical American sitcom where the main characters portray distinctive and interesting personalities and characteristics with humorous lines and funny movements. Therefore, during the translation process of subtitles, the translator should not only faithfully reproduce the storey plot and effectively transmit the cultural information behind those humorous lines, but also help the audience get a grasp of the character's personalities and characteristics.

For Example:

Original text: (Season 4, Episode 21)

Computer: Self-destruct sequence aborted.

Sheldon: You may have gone to Cambridge, but I'm an honorary graduate of Starfleet academy.

Translation 1:

Computer: 自毁程序中断。

Sheldon: 你也许在剑桥上过学，但我是星舰学院的荣誉毕业生。

Translation 2:

Computer: 自毁程序中断。

Sheldon: 你也许在剑桥上过学，但哥可是星舰学院的荣誉毕业生。

Storyline:

Leonard's new girlfriend, Priya, is a professional Indian lawyer. She couldn't stand Sheldon bullying Leonard all day, so she decided to use her expertise against Sheldon's "roommate agreement". As a result, Sheldon was basically defeated. The next day, Sheldon handed over an improved version of the roommate agreement and threatened Priya that if Leonard didn't agree with the "new roommate agreement", the self-destruct programme that he set up would send an email to Priya's parents, exposing her love affair with Leonard, since her parents were not fans of white guys. Priya was scared, and forced Leonard to compromise. After Sheldon won the game, the above conversation shows his contempt for Priya.

Analysis:

Sheldon has an IQ of 187, but with a very low EQ. He was so conceited that he refused to believe that there were people smarter than him in this world. He thinks he is omnipotent and can't make any mistakes. Therefore, when he finally outsmarts Priya, the lines that he utters actually show some contempt for the puny people that he used to look down on. We can see that the "I'm a" in the dialogue was translated as "我", which is a direct translation, and "哥可是" which was added with some other expressions. The first translation was relatively flat, while the second one sounded more arrogant, which perfectly reflected Sheldon's personality and characteristics.

For Example:

Original text: (Season 6, Episode 14)
Raj:Oh, I'm not dark chocolate. I'm melt in your mouth caramel.

Translation 1:
Raj:我的肤色不是黑巧克力色。我是化在嘴里的焦糖色。

Translation 2:
Raj:人家的肤色不是黑巧克力色。人家是化在嘴里的焦糖色啦。

Storyline:

Raj and Howard ordered customized action figures online. They decide to get an action figure that looks like them. However, when they opened the package, they were disappointed with the outcome. Raj found that the skin colour of the action figure was actually darker than his natural color.

Analysis:

First of all, Raj displays a soft and gentle, even slightly feminist, characteristic in this play. Therefore, the original text "I'm" was translated as "我是" and "人家", the second translation is way better than the first one, which can perfectly reflect the feminist personality of Raj. In the mean time, the "啦" at the end of the sentence displays a "Taiwanese tone", which is used to be known as a more sweet and girly tone in China. This helps emphasize the sweet personality of Raj.

5.3 Translation in line with character's speaking scene

As we all know, people tend to change their speaking habits according to different situations. Identity and personality are two of the main factors that affect people's speaking habits. However, in different occasions and environments, people's speaking habits tend to be changed, whether consciously or unconsciously. For instance, gentlemen and ladies can sometimes be furious, and scholars and officials can also be abusive on some special occasions.

"The Big Bang Theory" was created with a humorous and fascinating storey plot. Each episode often consists of conflicts, climaxes, and cliffhangers. Therefore, the storey displays various different speaking scenes based on its fascinating and interesting plot. In other words, characters need to change their speaking habits according to different situations and occasions to attract the interest of the audience.

For Example:

Original text: (Season 11, Episode 1)
Penny: Yeah, I didn't even think you could get pregnant while you were breastfeeding.
Bernadette：Well, guess what? You can.

Translation 1:
Penny: 对啊，我本还以为哺乳期内，女人是不会怀孕的呢。
Bernadette：你猜怎么着？可以的。

Translation 2:
Penny: 对啊，我以为在哺乳期内，压根就不可能怀孕。
Bernadette：你猜怎么着？老娘就怀了。

Storyline:

Bernadette discovered that she was pregnant again. She just couldn't accept it and hadn't told her husband yet. She comes to her best friend Penny, hoping that Penny might help her accept the reality, so the above dialogue was uttered.

Analysis:

Bernadette comes with a sweet appearance and a voice that sounds like a Disney princess. But in this situation, she can't accept the fact that she is having another baby, which makes her world upside down again. Therefore, she is now very impatient with anyone and sounds grumpy with every word she utters. The word "you can" was translated as"可以的" and "老娘就怀了", the first translation sounds relatively flat, while the second one perfectly reflects how grumpy Bernadette is in this situation.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, subtitle translation is not only a process of converting two languages, as well as transmitting social and cultural information, but is also a process of reproducing the characters' identities, personalities, and speaking scenes. The identity, personality, and speaking scenes of the characters should be considered as important factors in the field of film and television translation. The translator should try his best to reproduce the image and sentiments behind the characters' lines and help the audience quickly understand the identity and characteristics of the characters. In the process of subtitle translation, full consideration and analysis of the characters' identities, personalities, and speaking scenes can help in reproducing the characteristics and sentiments of the characters' lines, so as to improve the audience's viewing experience.

References

李运兴2001. 字幕翻译的策略[J]. 中国翻译（04）：38-40.

钱绍昌2000. 影视翻译——翻译园地中愈来愈重要的领域[J].中国翻译(01):61-65.

Diaz-Cintas, Jorge. 1999. Dubbing or Subtitling: The Eternal Dilemma. Perspectives: Studies in Translatology[J].

Shuttleworth,Mark,and Moira Cowie.2004. Dictionary of Translation Studies.Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press [C].