From the Perspective of the Skopos Theory-- A Study of Fansub Groups' Subtitle Translation

Fangying Gong[1,a,*]

[1]*Nankai University, Xuefu Street, Tianjin, China*
a.15689293103@163.com
corresponding author

Keywords: subtitle translation, Skopos theory, TV series, fansub groups' translation

Abstract: With the increase of cultural exchanges between China and the west, an increasing number of English TV series have been introduced into China in recent years. Therefore, subtitle translation, as the main approach to understand plots for the most audience, has attracted more and more attention. However, nonstandard subtitles which are translated by unofficial fansub groups raise some problems. This paper, from the perspective of Skopos theory, taking TV series *Why Women Kill* as an example, makes a critical analysis of unofficial translated subtitles, and puts forward some causes and improvement suggestions on its defects, which can be applied in other fansub groups' translation.

1. Introduction

As a large number of English TV series are introduced into China, subtitle translation becomes increasingly important, which is an important way for most Chinese people to understand the content of TV series. In the past, scholars usually focused on the analysis of official Chinese subtitles, such as *Official Assessment of Chinese Subtitles* (官方中文字幕评估)[1] wrote by Bian Ruoxi (2018) and *Subtitle Translation of Cartoon Films from the Perspective of Adaptation Theory* (从顺应论视角看卡通电影的字幕翻译)[2] wrote by Yue Haoping and Huang Guiying (2017). The scholar circle paid little attention on fansub groups. However, many TV series now are only translated by some fansub groups, and no official version is available. As they are all amateur translators and have not received systematic learning of translation theories, the subtitle translation is inevitably flawed. For example, superficial understanding of cultural connotation, prolix and vague language are the possible problems.

Through the study of its subtitle translation, we can find the imperfections and put forward pieces of advice for modification. More importantly, if translators have different understandings of the language and culture, the translation results will be different, which will have an impact on the audience. In terms of the free translation that promotes the audience's understanding of the TV series, we can absorb and draw upon fruits of it; but for those that leave the audience confused, we need to learn a lesson and avoid repeating it.

This study will take *Why Woman Kill* as an example to study such kind of subtitles translated by fansub groups. Recently, the American TV series is very popular. It has no official Chinese subtitles, so the audience can only watch translation by fansub groups. The release of *Why Woman Kill* has

been warmly welcomed by Chinese people, and social media apps are full of people's discussions on the plots and characters, so it is suitable to be discussed as a representative example of translation by the fansub groups.

In terms of the paper significance, this paper can draw the attention of the scholar circle to fansub groups' translation, so that more researchers can study the problems and values of fansub groups' translation. In addition, in the process of analyzing problems of fansub groups, the paper also gives pieces of advice to improve their translation quality. Meanwhile, the study of the TV series itself is related to social issues, so the study of its subtitle translation also has a strong practical guiding significance. Fansub groups' translation has had a significant impact on the language and culture of society. Therefore, these studies are of social and academic significance.

2. Literature Review

There are many translation theories to analyze subtitles. Compared to other translation issues, subtitle translation is less literary. However, it attaches more emphasis on communication and cultural exchange. In addition, the most important purpose of subtitle translation is to make the dialogues understood by the audience. Based on these features, this paper selects Skopos theory to analyze the subtitle translation of the TV series, so as to analyze the causes of translation defects more accurately and appropriately.

Skopos theory means the process of "translation is the cross-cultural communication activities that have clear purpose and intention, based on the original text",[3] Zheng tiantian said. Under Skopos theory, translation was regarded as a behavior with particular purpose.[4] The position of source text is relatively lower and translators have more initiative.

The development of Skopos theory can be divided into four stages. Firstly, in 1971, Katharina Reiss published *Translation Criticism: The Potentials and Limitations,* which marked the beginning of German functional theories of translation. "Taking equivalence as her basis, Katharina Reiss developed a model of translation criticism based on the functional relationship between source and target texts".[5] However, she then found complete equivalence is unrealistic and even unnecessary, instead, translators need to consider the function of the source texts and the receivers of target texts, which can be seen as a foundation of Skopos theory.[6]

Secondly, Hans Vermeer published *A Framework for a General Theory of Translation* in 1978 to show his functionalist approach and break linguistic translation theory. Then, he proposed "Skopostheorie" in his article S*kopos and Commission in Translational Action* in 1989, which freed translation studies from the bondage of source-centered theory. Under this theory, translation is a purposeful behavior, and translators should determine the purpose according to the intended audience, considering their culture background, expectations and communicative needs.[7] Vermeer thought the Skopos rule should be the first considered rule, and he also believed that translators have initiative to adopt corresponding translation strategies according to different translation purposes.[8]

Thirdly, in 1984, based on action theory, Justa Holz-Manttari wrote *Theory of Translation Action*, developing Vermeer's Skopos theory further and proposing "translational action". She thought translation was a complex action designed to achieve a particular purpose, and paid much attention to participants in the process of translation.[9]

Fourthly, Christina Nord published *Translating as a Purposeful Activity* in 1997. He summarized and improved all functional theories, using English to systemize internal and external factors needed to be considered when translating for the first time and how to determine translations strategies based on source texts. Additionally, she found shortcomings of Skopos theory, so she proposed function plus loyalty principle to supplement Skopos theory.[10]

Under Skopos theory, there are many strategies can be used to translate subtitle. In "English Translation Study of Chinese Tourism Texts Based on the Skopos Theory-A Case Study of Hubei

Scenic-spot Translation", Yi weiwei (2018) presented four strategies, which are: analogy, addition, omission and adaptation. This paper will discuss and analyze the four strategies.[11] The definition of the four strategies are following. Analogy means compering the Chinese event, person, place, allusion with the similar things in English culture. Based on the its definition, we can learn analogy strategy is affected by Hans Vermeer's "Skopostheorie". Both of them take translators' understanding of cultural background into consideration, paying attention to the expression of the proper cultural images. Addition means adopting appropriate explanation or paraphrase for the sake of comprehending the information related to the names of people, places and dynasties as well as historical events and allusions. Omission means cutting the unnecessary, repetitive and unimportant information of source texts. In terms of addition and omission strategies, they allow for different factors to adjust sentences, which is in line with Christinane Nord's conclusion. These strategies also follow the function plus loyalty principle, because the aim of them is to express the original and true meaning as much as possible in an easily understood way. Adaptation means some adjustments are necessary because of difference between thinking model of Chinese and foreigners. Adaptation strategy follows Hans Vermeer's thought that put Skopos rule in the first place. The purpose of adaptation is to transfer information clearer and make the audience understand better, which is coherent with Skopos rule.

The paper is going to use the four strategies to discuss problems which exist in the subtitle of *Why Women Kill*, analyzing the causes and modifying the defects.

3.   Critical Analysis of Subtitle for *Why Women Kill*

3.1. The Violation of Analogy Strategy

The analogy means replacing the English images including event, person, place and allusion by using similar Chinese counterparts to help the audience understand the plots faster and better. However, in why women kill, some translations do not reach the standard. For example:

English: "It's called a chemical peel." "I know, one more and she'll be the Phantom of the Opera."

Chinese: "是一种化学换肤术." "我知道是，再弄一次她就变成歌剧魅影了."

This literal translation does not conform to the standard of analogy, because "she'll be the Phantom of the Opera" was literally translated into "她就变成歌剧魅影了". The problem is that many Chinese do not know the implied meaning of this phrase, thus they cannot understand the irony immediately when they see the translation. I think it would be better if translate it into "她的脸就要僵得像真人芭比了". in Chinese, a human barbie usually refers to someone who has had plastic surgery, which is familiar to Chinese people. Adding "僵得" to the front of a human barbie emphasizes the stiffness of her face, which is also consistent with the extended meaning of the Phantom of the Opera. Compared with the original one, the audience can understand the irony of the speaker through my translation.

English: I'm not the one who dressed him up as backup dancer to Liza Minnelli.

Chinese: 把他打扮成像丽莎·明尼利的伴舞人员的人可不是我。

The original version translated "backup dancer to Liza Minnelli" into "丽莎·明尼利的伴舞人员". Maybe a number of western people know the singer very well, but most Chinese people have no idea about her and her backup dancers. Based on analogy, it would be better to transfer it into backup dancer to another famous Chinese singer or try free translation. I prefer the latter and my version is "把他打扮成一个浮夸绿火鸡的人可不是我". If we use another Chinese singer, it is still possible that the audience can not get the point; but if we use free translation, adding to the visual effect, the audience is able to understand the speaker's slight irony.

3.2. The Violation of Addition Strategy

Addition is helpful for the audience to understand the source texts better and quicker by adding explanations the nouns, including some terminologies, events and names. When translating, addition is very necessary due to the lack of background knowledge. For example:

English: What you spent on it can buy a whole lot of escargots.

Chinese: 你花在这胸针上的钱都够买好多蜗牛了。

In the mind of most Chinese, snails are a ubiquitous creature in the streets, so the direct association between an expensive $10,000 brooch and worthless snails can be difficult for the audience to understand. My translation is "你花在这胸针上的钱都够买好多盘不菲的法国蜗牛了".

In fact, escargot in restaurants was very expensive because of its high cost and high demand, but a number of Chinese people do not know about it. Therefore, under the perspective of Skopos theory, this explanation should be included in the translation to fill the knowledge gap, the audience can quickly understand the meaning of this sentence, and can better realize the value of this brooch.

English: Be good to Jade. She's your muse.

Chinese: 对杰德好点。她可是你的缪斯。

The original version literally translated "muse" into "缪斯". Many Chinese people may have heard the name of muse, but they have no idea about what does the muse represent. In addition, as time goes on, the meaning of muse now is also simplified to goddess on many occasions, which increases the audience's confusion: why did the speaker choose muse as the goddess to call Jade?

To solve the problem, my version is "对杰德好点。她可是你的缪斯，是你的灵感源泉". In Greek mythology, muses are the goddess of art and science, who can encourage you and inspire you to create artistic works. Therefore, adding the specific functions of the muse is able to help the audience better understand that the speaker's praise of Jade is because of her function that inspired the writer to create, rather than thinking that the speaker is simply praising her in general terms.

3.3. The Violation of Omission Strategy

Subtitle translation has the characteristics of instantaneity, so the translator should let the audience understand sentences in the shortest time. When the sentences are relatively long, the translator can properly delete the unimportant information without affecting the expression of the main information and the understanding of the audience, so as to facilitate the audience to glance over the subtitles to the greatest extent. For example:

English: But I think that a part of him always resented me for managing the situation in a way that he couldn't.

Chinese: 但我觉得有一部分的他一直在恨我，恨我用他做不到的方式处理当时的情况。

The original one is very long, and "有一部分的他" sounds very strange in Chinese. I think it can be changed into "他仍然恨我当时对他的非常手段". I omit the phrase of "a part of", because the sentence emphasizes the state that "he always resented me", instead whether a part or a whole of him. I simplify "managing the situation in a way that he couldn't" and use free translation. In Chinese, "非常手段" means abnormal measures, which implies that he could not endure and felt suffering. In addition, the short version is more convenient to browse.

English: So why don't you leave? I could ask you the same question.

Chinese: 那你为什么不离开呢？我还想问你这个问题。

As to the second sentence, the translator translated it word for word, but my version is "那你呢？" First, the original translation is a little stiff, which is not in line with normal communication habits. Second, I omit "the same question" part and my version is so short and precise to let the audience

understand the speaker's rhetorical tone quickly, responding to the characteristics of instantaneity of subtitle translation.

3.4. The Violation of Adaption Strategy

As a result of the different ways of thinking and speaking styles of Chinese and English people, word-to-word translation is difficult to be practiced because the target language tends to have an obvious translationese. Therefore, based on the Skopos theory, we should adjust the sentence structure, part of speech and word order, so as to conform to the audience's language habits. For example:

English: My divorce lawyer feels an ongoing affair with a teenager could make me seem unsympathetic.

Chinese: 我的离婚律师认为一场和青少年的进行时出轨会让我看起来不那么招人喜欢。

Fansub groups translated this sentence almost word to word, but the translation does not accord with Chinese people's habits of speaking, especially the part "一场和青少年的进行时出轨". I think we can translate it into "我的离婚律师认为出轨青少年会让我遭人冷眼". In order to conform to the speaking habits of Chinese people, I change part of speech of "affair" from noun into verb, and omit the unnecessary and redundant "an ongoing" part. "Unsympathetic" shows people's unfriendly attitude towards her, and "遭人冷眼" is more in line with people's reaction when they know someone has an affair in marriage.

English: by the way, I don't want anyone at the art gallery knowing about this. Not until the divorce is final.

Chinese: 顺便说下，我不希望画廊有人知道这件事，离婚办好前不能传出去。

The original version is more conformed to the word order of English, but the two sentences seem to be separated in Chinese. Therefore, I change it into "顺便说下，离婚之前，我不希望画廊有人知道这件事". I change part of speech of "divorce" from noun to verb, which is more frequently used in spoken Chinese, and simplify "离婚办好之前不能传出去" into "离婚之前", which is shorter and implies the original meaning. In addition, I change the word order to make it look more natural for the audience.

4. Discussion of Problems Caused by Translation Faults

From the above analyses, we can find some effects caused by these problems. First of all, translation errors going against the four strategies will affect the audience's understanding of the original plots.

The wrong translation of the original sentences will confuse the audience. For the original sentence involving some cultural differences and historical origins, if the translators do not provide corresponding notes or analogies to help the audience understand, the audience may give up watching the drama because they feel confused. With regard to foreign TV series, the loss of the audience also means losing the significance of cultural transmission.

Second, translation violating "adaption" strategy usually leads to the poor-quality Chinese, which will affect Chinese gradually.

Apart from the problem of misunderstanding of English texts, we also need to attach importance to the quality of Chinese translation. As a large number of foreign dramas enter China, more and more Chinese people begin to watch them, and most of them still rely on the subtitles for understanding. However, there are a large number of Chinese language problems in subtitle translation, such as redundancy (a large number of unnecessary "的" and "所") and unidiomatic Chinese word order and logic due to literal translation. Over time, this kind of Chinese with translationese and English thinking will erode our Chinese and language culture.

For some cultures and memes in foreign TV dramas, if the translators do not explain them properly, people who are fond of watching and familiar with British and American TV dramas will form their own cultural circle, while others will lose interest in entering this circle. The disconnect between this culture and the outside world will become more and more apparent.

Most of the members of Fansub groups watch a large number of British and American dramas and have a certain understanding of the culture of English-speaking countries. Therefore, when translating the subtitles, they sometimes ignore the audience's understanding of these cultures, thinking that the audience know as much as they do, thus fail to follow "addition" and "analogy" strategies. For example, as to the "escargot" mentioned in the above analysis, the subtitle group assumed that the audience knew the price and had no additional explanation, which is easy to cause confusion. The cultural difference between translators and the audience is not only about foreign cultures, but also sometimes about the use of Chinese buzzwords. Some of the audience may not know much about the Internet language, so they can't get the joke.

There are some of the unadjusted word order, wrong words and other mistakes, which violate "adaption" and "omission" strategies. These mistakes may be caused by the tight translation time and hasty proofreading. Many fansub groups want to provide subtitles to the audience as soon as possible after the new series comes out, so it is unavoidable that some translations are not perfect.

From the examples given above, we can see that there are also some word-to-word literal translation. This kind of translation method is not to be forbidden to use, but we need to analyze whether the translation sound like real Chinese. For some stiff literal translation, it may be related to the translators' Chinese and English proficiency. Because the members of fabsub groups are mostly just translation lovers, their English and Chinese proficiency, translation theory knowledge and practice cannot be completely guaranteed.

5. Suggestions for Subtitle Translation of English TV Series

Considering these defects in fansub groups' translation, the official translation is the best solution. Compared with members of fansub groups, official translators are more likely to keep the four strategies in mind, taking factors such as culture and national condition into consideration to make the translation more acceptable. In addition, the official team will have a more detailed and accurate analysis and principles on the translation methods adopted. Official versions have lower rates of translation errors of violating the four strategies and higher language quality.

However, when only fansub groups' translation is available, the above four strategies are able to help translators find existed problems from analyses, becoming effective methods to improve the quality of subtitle translation. The mentioned examples in the paper also provide a good example for translators, so they can use the four strategies to re-correct and modify. Although official translators are better, fansub groups are pervasive in the market. Therefore, they still need to learn translation theories which include the four strategies, thus improve their translation methods.

References

[1] Bian ruoxi (2018). Official Assessment of Chinese Subtitles. Dissertation of Beijing Foreign Studies University.

[2] Yue haoping, Huang guiying. (2017). Subtitle Translation of Cartoon Films from the Perspective of Adaptation Theory. Journal of Mudanjiang University, 26(01), 120-122.

[3] Zheng tiantian. (2012). An Analysis of Film Subtitle Translation from Perspective of Skopos Theory (In Chinese). Proceedings of Conference on Creative Education (CCE2012), China, 1157-1158.

[4] Du xiaoyan. A Brief Introduction of Skopos Theory. (2012). Theory and Practice in Language Studies, Vol. 2, No. 10, 2189-2193.

[5] Nord, Christiane. (1997). Translating as a Purposeful Activity. New York: St. Jerome Publishing.

[6] Reiss, Katharina. (1971). Translation Criticism: the Potentials and Limitations. New York: St. Jerome Publishing.

[7] Vermeer, Hans. (1989). Skopos and Commission in Translational Action. Helsinki: Oy Finn Lectura Ab.

[8]   Vermeer, Hans. (1989). *Skopos and Commission in Translational Action. Helsinki: Oy Finn Lectura Ab.*

[9]   Manttari, Justa Holz. (1984). *Theory of Translation Action. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia.*

[10] Lv liangqiu, Zhu hongye and Ning puyu. (2014). *Subtitle Translation of Foreign Movies and TV Series under Skopos Theory. Journal of Language Teaching and Research, Vol. 5, No. 4, 901-905.*

[11] Yi weiwei. (2018). *English Translation Study of Chinese Tourism Texts Based on the Skopos Theory- A Case Study of Hubei Scenic--spot Translation. Overseas English, 136-137.*