



A Study on Translation Methods of American Humor Subtitles—Take the American Sitcom *2 Broke Girls* for Example

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Abstract

Subtitle is an important part of film and television. With a large number of American TV series in the Chinese market, in order to help Chinese audiences to understand the content and American cultural background, especially American humor culture, subtitle translation has become a vital bridge for Sino-US cultural exchanges. Subtitle translation is a method-oriented science. Then, this paper mainly discusses humorous lines on TV series and introduces the causes of American humor and its main themes. This paper combines the functional equivalence theory and studies the translation methods and skills of humorous lines in the sitcom. The subtitle translation of the American sitcom *2 Broke Girls* is taken as the research object, and the translation of a large number of lines in the sitcom is taken as an example. It mainly analyzes the specific application of literal translation, free translation, amplification, transliteration, and entertainment rewriting in subtitle translation. It is expected to better convey the connotation and cultural information of film and television works to the audience and provide references to translators and researchers in this field.

Keywords

Subtitle translation; *2 Broke Girls*; American humor

1. Introduction

With the ever-closer cultural exchanges between China and the United States, a large number of American films and TV series have entered the Chinese market and become popular among Chinese fans. In the early years, most people watched dubbed foreign films, but in recent years, more people prefer to watch original English movies and dramas, and subtitle translation has also frequently appeared in people's vision. Therefore, the paper mainly studies the translation strategies of American humorous lines. According to the information collected from CNKI, before 2005, there were not many articles on subtitle research, and the content was not very extensive. And from 2006 to 2015, it can be obtained through the analysis of various literature in Chinese journals that the number of academic journals of research film and television translation in China began to increase year by year (Wang Xuelian & Li Xinxin, 2017). Therefore, the subtitle translation started relatively later in China, so it has not attracted enough attention from many experts and scholars. However, more and more people have found the research value of subtitle translation and gradually started to get involved in this new translation field.

2. Basic Introduction of American Humor

Humor is a form of language in human communication. It is a relationship lubricant and the common language and

art of the mankind. The producers of films and dramas often use funny plots, clever arrangements, and the art of language to create a kind of amusing and intriguing humor mood. And the humor itself and the culture are interrelated: Humor can't be separated from the restrictions of national conditions, nations, times, and aesthetic and psychological differences (Zhou, 1993). Humor, which is popular in a country, often vividly expresses the nation's underlying aspirations, concerns and conflicts, and projects an image of the nation as a whole.

The American humor plays an important role in the history of word literature and art, the sitcom is just a window of humorous culture. Americans believe that humor is a kind of personal quality. If a person talks with a sense of humor, it can be seen that he has profound literary.

2.1 Origin

First of all, this is associated with the British humor tradition of Britain, as well as in the early hard colonial time, the European immigrants need the humor to support their own spiritual world. This is one of the reasons why the American humor culture is more exaggerated, aggressive, and straightforward.

Secondly, in terms of the national cultural background, the United States has not been influenced by the Confucian conservatism and the "doctrine of the mean" of the Confucian culture. In more than two hundred years of development, Americans are also indifferent to questions on morality, propriety and hierarchy, a serious and cautious style of life is not recommended.

Finally, this is also the entertainment essence of contemporary commercial sitcoms. The film and television industry are closely related to the prosperity of industry and commercialization. Its gradual prosperity and maturity in recent decades are also the decades when human beings have entered a period of pressure (Jing, 2017). Obviously, a large part of the purpose of a sitcom like *2 Broke Girls* is to achieve mental relaxation and balance for the audience, and finally to attract those who want and need to relieve stress and relax.

2.2 Theme

2.2.1 Political events

In American, Americans often play some innocuous jokes on their politicians. This humor theme is popular among all Americans.

Example 1:

Han: In my country, we never comment on two things: women's pregnancies or Kim Jong-un's haircut.

Comment: The background of the sentence is: Sofie let Han comment her baby bump, Han responds to her like this. The character Han is a Korean. And in Korea, the president Kim Jong-un's haircut is often teased and ridiculed among people.

2.2.2 Social life

The United States is the fourth largest country with many nations in the world, plus an advanced economy and strong comprehensive national power, which bring up the unique openness and inclusiveness of American society and create humor. Therefore, the social life also became one of the hot topics that people often talked.

Example 2:

Max: "Yeah, that's snow when you're rich. The only snow angels you'll see this year are the six crack addicts frozen to our stoop."

The story of *2 Broke Girls* takes place in Brooklyn, New York City, USA. Brooklyn is a relatively poor district in New York City, with poor security and high crime rates, so every winter, there are some people who die on the street due to drug or alcohol abuse.

2.2.3 Immigration issues

The United States is the most famous country with rich immigrants including Americans, African-Americans, Latinos, and Asian-Americans. Immigration not only brings various religious faiths, life habits, and values but also many cultural conflicts and collisions to this new continent. The various humors about immigration have a strong resonance for Americans because the sweetness and bitterness of immigrant life contained in humor is not only the story of the fathers, but also the portrayal of the real life of Americans (Hong, 2010).

Example 3:

Han lee, a restaurant owner from South Korea, is not satisfied with his employees not working hard.

Han: "In Korea, you all would be left on the curb a taken away with the garbage."

Max: Is that how you go to American, Han?

The sitcom *2 Broke Girls* also reflected the immigration issue: many important characters are from other nations or countries. For example, the heroine Max was born in a Jewish family, the restaurant's owner Han is from Asia, the chief Oleg is from Ukraine and his girl-friend Sophie comes from Poland and the cashier Earl is an African-American. Many of the jokes in the *2 Broke Girls* are built around their different identity backgrounds.

3. Translation Methods of Subtitle Translation of Comedy

In the process of translating humorous language, cultural inequality, and expression differences inevitably lead to the untranslatability of some punchlines, which makes the translation work more difficult. Due to the different connotations and backgrounds of humorous lines, the translation is not a simple process, which needs to take into account the context of the original text and the understanding ability of the audience. Therefore, the relevant translation methods and skills should be flexibly used to avoid the distortion of the target language and the loss of information. The translation of a sitcom is always the key to the smooth delivery of humorous effects. Although much of the humor in daily life is spontaneous and unconscious, in the creation of literature or film and television dramas, humor comes more from the conscious effort of the creator. The translator must determine whether the audiences are aware of and understand the meaning to be expressed, and whether the humorous elements play a humorous function in the target language. Coupled with the limitations of form and text in film and television works, it may be more difficult for translators to convey the ideal effect.

According to Nida's point, "translation is the most equivalent reproduction of source language using target language, reproduced information gives priority to meaning, the second is style, but even so, the style is also crucial." For the translation of sitcom subtitles, style is also a crucial and influential aspect. Since different works have different linguistic features, the translators need to achieve stylistic equivalence and convey emotions and significance as much as possible on the basis of a more authentic representation of the source language style.

3.1 Literal translation

Literal translation, literally speaking, is a direct translation. In fact, it refers to keeping the original content and expression of the source language as much as possible in the translation. In literal translation, the translator should try to do as much as possible without destroying the structure of the original language and maintain its true integrity, only making some phrase adjustments and modifications as necessary. The sentence which is translated by literal translation, its meaning is clear and accurate and very helpful to the reader's understanding. Although simple, there are not many sentences that can be applied to literal translation, but only certain phrases and simple sentences.

Example 4:

Max: Who wants to hear from a human mustard packet?

Chinese translation: shui hui ting ren xing jie mo bao de yi jian?

Comment: "ren xing ji emo bao" is Max's description of Han wearing a waiter uniform whose color looks like mustard. Max compares Han to a "human mustard packet", which has a sense of humor and which is simple and easy to understand for Chinese audiences. So that the literal translation can be used directly, "human mustard packet" corresponds to "ren xing ji emo bao", which maintains the original structure and expression of the original sentence. The way of literal translation accords with the functional equivalence and "reader's response" and let the audience directly and clearly understand the humor of the lines.

3.2 Free translation

Due to the many differences in national culture and language expressions, sometimes literal translation makes the content seem obscure and makes the audience confused. At this time, the use of free translation is the best choice, that is, to abandon the form, put the expression of meaning in the first place, and thus achieve the equivalence of meaning, which is also the core of functional equivalence theory, so that the audience with the target language and source language has a basically consistent viewing experience.

Example 5:

Max: Well, at least we know you're not adopted.

YYeTs: guo ran yi chuan le ni ba nong qian de ji yin a.

Comment: The background of this sentence is: Caroline met Max for the first time. In order to prove to Max that the identity of a rich girl and a good business school background, Caroline played tricks and succeeded in selling small cakes at a good price, the reason why Max responded to her like this, is because Caroline's father was in jail for huge financial fraud.

The literal translation is “zhi shao wo men zhi dao ni bu shi ling yang lai de”, the Chinese audiences may not understand, and even if they understand it, they will feel that this sentence is too obscure and rigid. But the YYeTs took use of free translation, which rightly expresses Max's thoughts at this time and is very consistent with the character, which reached the equivalence of meaning.

Example 6:

Max: Hate to interrupt the “perfect white teeth” convention.

Chinese translation: bao qian da duan ni men qiang yan huan xiao jia ke tao de dui hua.

Comment: The background of this sentence is: Caroline is talking about old days with her ex-boyfriend, their conversation is pretentious, so Max interrupted them. The literal translation of “perfect white teeth” is confusing for Chinese audiences. However, the free translation “reluctant greetings” is trenchant, which totally accords with Max's character and is more explicit and direct. The Chinese audiences can better understand and feel its humor.

Example 7:

David: Whatever you put out there comes back to you.

Chinese translation: Shan you shan bao, e you e bao.

Comment: A literal translation of this sentence as “Everything comes back to you no matter where you put it” would not achieve the intended effect of the original. Therefore, the translator uses an ancient Chinese proverb “shan you shan bao, e you e bao”, which means that good deeds are rewarded, and bad deeds are punished. It reduces the difficulty of understanding for the Chinese audience.

3.3 Amplification

Amplification is also one of the commonly used methods in the translation of film and television works. This is not superfluous, but follows the principle of labor-saving, taking the perspective of the viewer as the starting point, and strives to maximize the understanding in the shortest time (Yu, 2015). Thus, it can be seen that amplification is in keeping with the “reader's response” in the functional equivalence.

Example 8:

Caroline: Dude, I just made a mistake on the application. Can't you just give us a break?

Chinese translation: nin neng bu neng da ren you da liang fang guo women?

Comment: This sentence's background is that Caroline is asking for help from the person who was offended by them, and she hopes that person can approve the business review of the cake dessert bar. “da ren you da liang” is an expression that Chinese people often use when asking for forgiveness and accords with the current context, so adding “da ren you da liang” into the simple translation “Can't you just give us a break?” by way of amplification will make the Chinese audience feel cordial and interesting.

There are many Sino-US cultural differences exist in the American movies and dramas, so that what is familiar to everyone in Western culture, the Chinese audience has no concept at all. In this case, the translator is required to add annotation.

Example 9:

Max: Where that guy goes? He disappeared faster than Adam Lambert.

Chinese translation: ta bi Adam Lambert de ren qi xiao shi de hai kuai.

Comment: Adam Lambert is the second place of a variety show named American Idol Season 8. What's more, he is an open gay singer, with rapid decline in his popularity.

For the above example, YYeTs used the way of amplification, which places an annotation “‘American Idol’ Runner-up of Season Eight, public gay singer” at the top of the screen. In this way, even people that don't know the background can be clear at a glance and quickly understand the punchline. Because the subtitle translation has a strong timeliness, it also should be noted that when annotating comments in the subtitle, the annotations should be succinct and clear and be placed in an easy-to-see location, letting viewers understand American culture while enjoying.

Example 10:

Max: I'm afraid if I start writing that down, it'll turn into a suicide note.

Chinese translation: Now I'm in the mood to write a suicide note, because I'm bored to death.

Comment: When a guest ordered a meal, she asked Max to write down her long-winded request which made Max feel irritable. It will not be able to accurately convey the meaning of the character with literal translation. Therefore, the translator added the second half of the sentence “because I am bored to death” to express the hidden meaning of the character. It can be seen that although there is a word limit in subtitle translation in order to make the audiences understand the plot clearly and intuitively, the translator can appropriately add words or sentences.

3.4 Transliteration

Transliteration, which means translating foreign words with Chinese characters with similar pronunciation. This Chinese character for transliteration can retain or abandon its own original meaning, and mainly focuses the pronunciation.

Example 11:

Caroline: Omg, you are haning me?

Chinese translation: ni zai ba wo dang han shuan ma?

Comment: The word “haning” in the sentence is translated to “dang han shua”, Because in the *2 Broke Girls*, the boss of restaurant “Han” is always ridiculed by Max, Caroline created the new word “haning” to express the meaning “teasing”, which enhanced the interestingness of statement and expressed the sense of humor. Under the guidance of functional equivalence, the translation should convey the equivalent humor. The word “han” means stupid and clumsy and its Chinese pronunciation sounds like “han”. Therefore, for the pronunciation and meaning, “Han” is corresponding with “han”, the word “haning” and the translation use the way of transliteration achieved the double equivalence of style and humor effect. Let the audience with different native language feel the same humor and achieved the ultimate goal of functional equivalence and conveying comedy effects.

What's more, *2 Broke Girls* has many names of people and places that are familiar to Chinese audiences. Therefore, the translators use transliteration to translate these names in order to fully show the exotic flavor of the original sitcom.

Example 12: Manhattan, Brooklyn, Caroline, Max, Earl, Oleg, Sophie, Peach, etc.

3.5 Entertainment-oriented rewriting

Entertainment-oriented rewriting has become a popular trend in the subtitle translation of English sitcoms, it breaks the rigidity of traditional translation and uses a lot of sentences and words with Chinese characteristics that familiar to Chinese audiences, such as online buzzwords, proverbs, famous epigrams and ancient poetry. This easy-to-understand translation style is not only refreshing in terms of content and form, but also subtly conveys the culture and humor in sitcoms, winning the praise of the vast majority of viewers (Cui, 2016).

Example 13:

Max: “We can stop looking, we found the world's most annoying hipster.”

Literal translation: bu yong kan le, wo men yi jing fa xian le shi jie shang zui fan ren de hipster.

YYeTs's translation: Zhong li xun ta qian bai du, quan shi jie zui tao yan de hipster jiu zai ben dian yi zi chu.

Comment: The translation is originally a sentence from an ancient Chinese poem by Xin Qiji, “Searching for him in a thousand places, suddenly upon turning around, I find that person in the dimly lit corner.” Through the method of entertainment-oriented rewriting, the sentence that was originally plain and bland in the Chinese audiences' view has become interesting and humorous. The entertainment-oriented rewriting as an emerging translation method of humorous English is very suitable for language translation with humorous color. Therefore, a large number of Chinese poems or proverbs familiar to Chinese audience are used in the subtitle translation of foreign sitcoms, which can immediately make audience understand the meaning that the characters want to express. The use of proverbs makes Chinese audience feel a sense of intimacy and familiarity, thus reducing the cultural shock.

Example 14:

Han: So, you're awake enough to ridicule the boss.

YYeTs: suo yi ni gou jing shen tu cao ni de lao ban.

Comment: Internet buzzwords refer to words or phrases that circulate on the Internet. They are widely used by people in their lives. Because of its simplicity, vividness and novelty, Internet buzzwords are coming into young people's views. Its use can not only create an active chatting atmosphere, but also can demonstrate the fashionable and individual lifestyle of young people. The word “tu cao” is an online buzzword, compared with the original meanings of “mock”, “tu cao” without malevolence and has the significance of recreation and jokes. Therefore, the

translation “tu cao” accords with the feature of the entertainment-oriented rewriting method.

Example 15:

Max: No one will even talk to her.

Chinese translation: Shu dao hu sun san, qiang dao zhong ren tui.

Comment: This is a conversation between Max and Peach. Max also knows about Caroline’s unfortunate situation. When Caroline was homeless, her so-called friends were unwilling to help her. “Shu dao hu sun san” means “A tree falls and the monkeys scatter” which refers to the fact that when powerful people come down in the world, those who depended on them leave in a hurry. And “Qiang dao zhong ren tui” means “a wall falls and everyone pushes it over” which refers to the fact that when someone is in trouble, people take advantage of the situation to attack him. These idioms are used appropriately and also fit Caroline’s desperate situation.

Appropriate translation methods and skills have two functions: one is to make it easier for cross-cultural audiences to understand the culture in American sitcoms; The second is to improve the effect of the performance of comedy. Sometimes English always is not vivid enough and it requires a large number of exaggerated expressions and actions of characters to express their performance, while Chinese is more vivid for expressing feelings. Therefore, it is necessary to use appreciative translation methods or skills when translating subtitles of English comedy.

4. Conclusion

Humor is the most difficult type of text for translators, but it is also the most common element in commercial films and dramas. In order to retain the artistic value of the original works, functional equivalence theory should be properly used in different aspects, so as to achieve many effects such as the true restoration of characters, the aesthetic reconstruction of artistic works, and the retention and sublimation of artistic value. There are various types of American humor in the sitcom *2 Broke Girls*, or amusing or profound. The special cultural elements of humor itself and the limitations of subtitle translation add difficulty to the transmission of humor. The comparison of different translation methods can reflect different style orientations and weigh criteria, thus providing an evaluation criterion for the communication of humorous elements in the subtitles of film and television dramas.

First of all, the author summarizes the causes of American humor and the topics by watching the sitcom and reading a large number of journals and papers. Under the premise of a deep understanding of American humor, the author can better understand the humor expressed in the sitcom.

Secondly, on the basis of the understanding of humorous lines, the author combined with living examples and under the guidance of functional equivalence to study subtitle translation methods and skills. For example, there are four translation methods and one skill, including literal translation, free translation, amplification, transliteration, and entertainment-oriented rewriting, which can help the target audiences understand the humorous content.

Generally speaking, in order to express the same effect as the source language and follow functional equivalence, the key is to choose the right translation method to translate according to specific lines and context.

At present, the research on the translation of comedy subtitles is still lacking. The author believes that the translation of comedy subtitles has a strong universality and adaptability. The theoretical guidance and strategic principles required are also quite extensive. The author hopes that in the future, more people will study the translation of comedy subtitles under different theoretical guidance and explore more feasible methods and strategies of translation, so as to further enrich the connotation of subtitle translation, promote the development of China's film, and television drama industry and boost the exchange of Chinese and American culture.

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