

A Study of American TV Series Subtitle Translation From the Perspective of Translation Variation Theory

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Abstract

In the Internet age, the spread of overseas film and television dramas is increasing day by day, and the high-quality requirements of domestic audiences for subtitle translation of film and television dramas need to be paid great attention by the translation community. Translation Variation Theory emphasizes that translators should translate according to the specific needs of readers, and the audience needs of subtitle translation are more diversified, so the theory is suitable for subtitle translation which requires extremely high flexibility. The author will explore the subtitle translation of American TV series from the perspective of Translation Variation Theory, and take *Friends* as an example to analyze the reasons why subtitle translation conforms to the Translation Variation Theory, so as to provide reference for future subtitle translation studies.

Keywords: translation variation theory, American TV series, subtitle translation, *Friends*

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the emergence and popularization of new media such as the Internet, more and more attention has been paid to the study of audio-visual translation. With the upsurge of English learning, American TV series are sought after by many English learners. Therefore, there are more and more studies on subtitle translation of American TV dramas. Among the few new translation theories put forward by Chinese scholars, Huang Zhonglian's Translation Variation Theory is particularly prominent. The innovative theory provides enlightenment for the study and practice of translation theory in the new era. Translation Variation Theory emphasizes that translators carry out translation variation activities according to the specific needs of readers. Subtitle translation is fleeting, which is different from other translated texts of literary works, and the audience cannot read the subtitle texts repeatedly. Translation Variation Theory is applicable to the study of American TV subtitle translation, which enables readers to absorb the most critical information in the shortest time. The purpose of the study is to explore the methods of subtitle translation by analyzing the Chinese subtitle of *Friends*, with a view to enriching the current subtitle translation studies of American TV dramas and providing a new perspective for the future subtitle translation study.

Friends was broadcast on NBC in 1994. The program has been broadcast for ten years and divided into ten seasons. The TV ratings remain high, and it has become a necessity for many American families. These six ordinary American youths performed stories, which fully reflected the unique humor, way of thinking and attitude towards life in the United States, and also made audiences in other countries have a deeper understanding of American culture while gaining a happy mood. This is probably one of the reasons why *Friends* has remained very popular since its launch.

2. Characteristics of Subtitle Translation

The quality of subtitle translation directly determines the communication effect of overseas film and television dramas. In order to improve the subtitle translation level, besides having a solid bilingual knowledge and European and American cultural background knowledge as well as information retrieval skills, it is crucial for translators to understand the characteristics of subtitle translation.

2.1 Comprehensive

Comprehensive means that film and television subtitle translation can interact with characters' language and dynamic pictures, complement each other, organically combine with characters' actions and expressions, and

achieve the synchronization of sound and picture. To a certain extent, it can provide audio-visual context for the audience to understand subtitle translation and provide convenience for subtitle translators.

2.2 Immediacy

Immediacy means that when the audience appreciates the subtitles of film and television works, they cannot read repeatedly, look back and forth, and compare with each other. Subtitles stay on the screen for a limited time, usually leaving very little time for the audience to think and aftertaste, which puts forward short and effective requirements for the timeliness of subtitle translation.

2.3 Popularity

Popularity means that as a means of mass media, film and television dramas should put themselves in the public's shoes. Subtitle translation should first consider the receptivity and market reaction of the audience, so subtitle translation should not be obscure, but should be oriented to the target readers.

3. Features of the English Subtitle of *Friends*

As soon as *Friends* was broadcast, it became famous. Its success promotes more Chinese audiences to understand American culture and appreciate American humor. The greatest function of subtitle translation is to help the audience grasp the central idea of film and television dramas and the meaning of characters' dialogues directly and effectively. Subtitle translation is undoubtedly the key to the success or failure of cultural communication. Before translation, the translator should have a general grasp of the subtitle characteristics of the original text, clear the cultural obstacles for the audience in advance, and ensure that the translated text conforms to the tone of the original text in order to convey humorous effects.

3.1 Colloquialism

Friends tells a series of hilarious stories about six protagonists living in apartments in New York City. The main shooting location of the characters in the play include Monica's apartment and the coffee house in Central Perk, which are full of affinity. The dialogue style between characters is easy and humorous, with simple words and single sentence pattern. Therefore, the biggest feature of its English subtitles is colloquialism.

3.2 American Humor

Because American slang is quoted in a large number of lines in the play, compared with Chinese audience, the dialogue of characters is easier for American audience to understand and appreciate. Therefore, it is an arduous task for translators to convey the information and culture of the original text with limited subtitles.

3.3 Individuation

The six protagonists have very different personalities. They are Monica, Rachel, Phoebe, Chandler, Joey and Ross. Monica is the hostess of the apartment, and she works vigorously. Her speech is crisp and passionate. Rachel realized the transformation from a spoiled rich girl to a strong woman in the workplace. In the early stage, because of her weak personality and weak tone of speech, she always hesitated. After self-reliance, the tone is obviously much firmer and more confident than before. Phoebe is a quaint and peaceful vegetarian, always speaking amazingly, and her quaint character often makes people wonder what she thinks. Chandler is such a tease. He always speaks with his own humorous tone, likes to make a series of body movements that make people laugh, and also likes to use self-mockery and irony to defend himself against embarrassing scenes. As a stuffy paleontology professor, Ross has his own stubborn insistence on the clarity of pronunciation of words, and he does things and speaks in regular sequences. Finally, Joey is a childish playboy who often makes a lot of jokes because of his lack of vocabulary.

To be sure, the six protagonists in the play have different personalities, which are reflected in the subtitles in words, tone, rhetoric and rhythm. On the basis of ensuring the accuracy of the translation, translators should express their own personality characteristics through various translation approaches, so as to make the translation conform to the personality characteristics of different characters.

4. The Translation Variation Approaches of the Subtitle Translation of *Friends*

Professor Huang Zhonglian put forward eleven methods of translation variation, which are selective translation, compilation, free translation, translation & creation, illustration, condensed translation, review, review & commentary, translation & commentary, revision and quoting. After preliminary analysis, the author finds that illustration, selective translation and translation & creation are the three most common translation variation approaches in this play.

Illustration is a translation variation activity in which the content of the original text is directly explained in the

target text, so as to integrate the target text with the original text. Illustration includes incorporating the annotations of the original text into the target text, and the translator also incorporates his own annotations into it. Sometimes, in order to make the audience better understand the deep connotation of the plot and the dialogue between the characters, it is necessary for the translator to add additional information to the original lines to supplement the original content. For example, if a character in the play quotes American slang, the translator will convey the central idea of slang to the audience in four-character idioms or other Chinese idioms. English often omits subjects or pronouns, which conforms to grammatical rules in certain contexts. However, in Chinese, it is difficult for the audience to understand the meaning of omitted content, so it is necessary for the translator to add information to expand the original content and meet the needs of the audience. It is also important to use concise sentences as much as possible, because additional information does not mean unlimited attachment. Translators should also consider that the number of subtitles should not be too many, otherwise it will affect the audience's perception.

Example 1:

Monica: Okay, look, this is probably for the best, you know?

Independence. Taking control of your life.

莫妮卡: 瞧 或许这样反倒最好

你独立了 可以主宰自己的人生

(Quoted from *Friends* Season 1, Episode 1)

Because Rachel escaped marriage, her father decided to refuse to provide financial support. Monica encourages Rachel, this is the beginning of her independent life. *Independence* is a noun, and if translated word by word, the translation is “独立”. This is very abrupt to the Chinese audience, because the translation does not conform to the Chinese expression habits. Combined with Monica's previous sentence, the original sentence is not a self-asking and self-answering sentence pattern, so the translator takes into account the needs of readers and adds subjects to the sentence to make it a complete sentence. Only in this way can the audience accurately understand Monica's meaning. In addition, after the subject is added, the number of subtitles will not be too long, which meets the conciseness standard of subtitle translation.

Example 2:

Chandler: Rach, We've got to settle.

Rachel: Settle what?

Chandler: The Jamestown colony of Virginia.

钱德勒: 瑞秋 我们得算帐

瑞秋: 什么定居

钱德勒: 在维吉尼亚的詹姆斯敦殖民地

settle 也有定居之意

(Quoted from *Friends* Season 1, Episode 18)

Girls and boys play card games together. When Rachel wants to leave, Chandler reminds her to pay the amount that she owes. But Rachel, as a novice in card games, did not understand the meaning of *settle*. Chandler made another habitual joke, deliberately describing *settle* as “定居”. This bridge is a typical American humor, which can be quickly understood by English-speaking audiences. However, as non-native English speakers, especially those with low English proficiency, it is difficult for Chinese audiences to grasp the jokes here without annotations. Translators should stand at different levels of audience, think differently, and provide easy-to-understand translations that are acceptable to the public. The translator uses interpretation to supplement another meaning of *settle*, that is, the meaning Chandler wants to express, which makes the Chinese audience suddenly enlightened and makes the audience realize Chandler's loquacious character.

Example 3:

Chandler: Take off their hats.

Phoebe: Popes in a Volkswagen.

钱德勒: 脱下他们的帽子

菲比: 教皇塞进大众车

笑话: 教皇摘下高帽子才能坐进大众车

(Quoted from *Friends* Season 1, Episode 21)

Ross's monkeys must be released to the zoo for mating when they are adults. Joey asked how to get the monkey to the zoo. Chandler, who has always been humorous, suddenly came up with a joke similar to his question. The pope Phoebe mentioned here is a Christian nickname for leaders and usually wears a high papal hat, so he must take it off before getting on the bus. Therefore, the joke "How do you put a pope in a Volkswagen" was born. However, Chinese audiences may not be familiar with this joke and cannot understand the laughter here. Therefore, the translator adds notes to Chandler's jokes outside the translation to explain the origin of the jokes, so that the audience can truly experience American humor.

Selective translation refers to deleting unnecessary contents in the original text, so that the amount of information in the revised translation is less than that in the original text and the full translation. The purpose of selective translation is to fully display the value of useful information. In order to improve the quality of the translated text and better meet the needs of the readers, the translator subtracts the contents that the readers do not need.

Example 1:

Monica: Why?! Why? why would anybody do something like that?

莫妮卡: 为什么 为什么会有人那样做

(Quoted from *Friends* Season 1, Episode 1)

Monica's date cajoled her into bed, then accidentally discovered that her colleague was also one of the victims, so she expressed her anger to her friends. Here, she asked *why* three times in a row, which is enough to show her strong incomprehension. However, in translation, if all three *why* are translated, it will take up too many subtitles and seriously affect the perception. Limited by the length of subtitle translation, translators choose selective translation, remove repetitive words in sentences and save subtitle space, so as not to affect the audience's understanding of lines and the overall experience of watching dramas.

Example 2:

Monica: Just breathe, that's it.

莫妮卡: 深呼吸

(Quoted from *Friends* Season 1, Episode 1)

Rachel had just been cut off from her financial resources and felt unable to breathe. Monica gave her a paper bag to teach her to breathe deeply. Here, *that's it* are meaningless words, which can be omitted in translation without causing ambiguity. Therefore, the translator adopts the translation variation method of excerpt to convey the meaning of Monica's lines to the audience concisely and clearly.

Example 3:

Monica: ...and you can't wait 4 1/2 minutes for a stupid onion tartlet?

莫妮卡: 而你却等不了四分半钟之后再吃洋葱馅饼

(Quoted from *Friends* Season 1, Episode 15)

Monica waited seven years for an interview with the chef, but the restaurant owner was too impatient to wait for four and a half minutes. Translators extract *stupid* in the original text. First, consider the length of subtitles. If *stupid* is added, it will weaken the readability of the translated text. Second, subtitle translation of sitcoms is different from literary translation, which can only convey the original ideas to readers through text description. Subtitle translation can convey information to the audience in combination with pictures. Therefore, the translator can cut down the translation appropriately. Even if the *stupid* here is excerpted, the audience can understand Monica's anger at this time by watching Monica's facial expressions. This selective translation is reasonable.

Translation & creation refers to changing the form or part of the content of the original text or even the style of the original text according to specific requirements. It is a true means of domestication, and a translation variation approach to meet the needs of specific readers at a specific level.

Example 1:

Joey: Hey! Here's the birthday boy!

乔伊: 嘿 寿星佬在啊

(Quoted from *Friends* Season 1, Episode 4)

Chandler and Joey bought an extra ticket to the hockey game, but they could not decide who could take their female companions to watch. So Joey deliberately told Ross that today was his birthday and took the opportunity to invite him to the game. “寿星” is the god of longevity in Chinese myths. Translators domesticate *birthday boy* into “寿星佬” in Chinese culture by means of translation & creation, which not only conforms to Chinese idioms, but also retains the colloquial features of subtitle translation, and at the same time plays a humorous role, thus achieving three goals with one stone.

Example 2:

Chandler: You, me, Joey, ice, guys' night out,

钱德勒: 你 我 乔伊 冰球 纯爷们之夜

(Quoted from *Friends* Season 1, Episode 4)

Ross suddenly discovered that today is the first anniversary of having sex with his ex-wife. Chandler deliberately made exaggerated body movements to encourage Ross to cheer up. “爷们” is the spoken language of Chinese people, which originated from Beijing dialect and generally refers to ambitious men. Chandler's gestures and tone are relaxed and playful, and his dialogue with Ross is colloquial, so the translation should keep the characteristics of the original text. The domestication of “爷们” not only embodies Chandler's humor, but also retains the colloquial nature of dialogue.

Example 3:

Jack: Look, there are people like Ross who need to shoot for the stars,

杰克: 而像罗斯这种人却注定要做人中之龙的

(Quoted from *Friends* Season 1, Episode 2)

Monica's father Jack is praising his son Ross. He literally means that people like Ross are destined to achieve great things. In order to highlight Jack's love for Ross, the translator translated *shoot for the stars* by means of translation & creation, and transformed it into “人中之龙” in Chinese expression, drawing the distance between the characters in the play and the Chinese audience. This kind of treatment can not only convey the characters' emotions, but also help the audience understand the characters.

Example 4:

Ross: Things change, roll with the punches.

罗斯: 世事难料 见招拆招

(Quoted from *Friends* Season 1, Episode 2)

Ross and Carol disagree on the name of the child. Carol and her current girlfriend have agreed on a name before, but Ross believes that it is not what it used to be and everything can be changed. *Friends* is an American sitcom. The purpose of this kind of TV series is to entertain and relax people. For the Chinese audience, if the subtitle translation is not concise and clear enough, the audience needs some laborious reading comprehension to understand the meaning of the lines, and the effect of watching the drama will be greatly reduced. If the translator literally translates the original text *roll with the punches*, the translated text is “承受一切打击”, which is obviously not as accurate and concise as the neat four-character phrase “见招拆招”.

5. Results

For American TV dramas with strong cultural atmosphere, subtitle translators will add additional information, such as historical or geographical background information, to the translation after weighing the audience's understanding and perception, so as to facilitate their understanding. It will also cut down the meaningless words in the original text, optimize the subtitle space, and create the best experience for the audience. In a word, translators should take the needs of the audience as the primary consideration, deal with the original text according to specific needs, consciously establish the awareness of spreading overseas excellent cultures, and play their role as a bridge between languages.

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