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# On Domestication and Foreignization in Subtitle Translation – A Case Study of American TV Series the Big Bang Theory

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ABSTRACT: In the era of the globalization of economic and cultural development, countries friendly communicate with each other and develop together. Mutual absorption and learning of the essence of culture or science and technology have become the inevitable trend. Under this circumstance, film and television shows have an indelible contribution to the dissemination of cultural knowledge. Accordingly, film subtitling and dubbing translation came into being. Subtitle translation, as a new branch of translation, although has a late start in China, has been developing rapidly in recent years. Subtitle translation not only can be said to be a kind of conversion of language, but a bridge between different cultures. This requires properly choosing effective translation strategies to achieve effective cross-language and cross-cultural conversion when the subtitles are translated. The two translation strategies domestication and foreignization which are the most basic translation strategies are frequently used. In this paper, film subtitling characteristics and the analyses of examples are combined, discussing the use and application of domestication and foreignization with the TV show The Big Bang Theory. Then, there comes a final conclusion- both domestication and foreignization have their own characteristics and advantages, which cannot bring out the best without the other one.

**KEYWORDS** —domestication, foreignization, culture, subtitle translation, The Big Bang Theory

#### I. INTRODUCTION

# 1. THE SIGNIFICANCE AND THE STATUS OF THE RESEARCH

Chinese film subtitle translation is a kind of new industry, but uneven in the market. It is necessary to be studied thoroughly to pave the way for the spread of foreign films and TV series and their contained culture. At present foreign films and TV series are prevalent in China, while the emerging domestic of subtitle translation is still very young, since the film subtitle translation is not a simple language conversion. In broad sense, it is restricted by the culture and language to a large extent; in common sense, even the speaking time can also affect the translation of subtitles (when there is a change in speech rate, captions tend to support that change. So it will be a burden to the audience if the subtitle is too long.) Then how to use the most simple language to convey the information to audience is a big issue, so the translation work is particularly important. Accordingly, the study of subtitle translation has great significance. But at present there are not enough subtitle translation studies. Search keywords "audiovisual subtitle translation" on Chinese HowNet, there are only 2003 related articles could be found, including journals, diversification papers, conference reports, etc., most of which are the studies centered on the translation theory. Although it is well known that the basic strategies of translation are domestication and foreignization, current papers rarely consider these basic aspects. On the contrary, the research scope of this paper mainly concentrates on a more detailed, basic aspect, and the starting point is very

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simple to understand. These practical application also can give audiovisual translation a little help in the selection of translation strategies.

Then the reason to select the Big Bang Theory to be the practice of translation project is that the play won the TCA (Television Critics Association) Award for best comedy series, and was very popular in China in recent years luring many young Chinese people and the TV ratings kept soaring. This comedy is based on the lives of a group of "scientific genius": Leonard, Sheldon, Howard Wolowitz, Rajesh Koothrappali and a beautiful neighbor Penny. Assuredly, its Chinese subtitle used a lot of domestication and foreignization translation strategies, which is a better research corpus for the study of subtitle translation.

#### 2. THE RESEARCH METHODS

The following methods are used: analysis, induction, exemplary method, literature research, case study and so on, for the sake of making the conclusion to be objective and convincing.

#### 3. STRUCTURE OF THE PAPER

In addition to the introduction and the conclusion, this paper is divided into four parts.

The first part introduces the related issues of subtitle; The second part analyses the relationship between subtitle translation and culture, drawing the conclusion that subtitle translation should be analyzed from cultural perspective; and then introducing the corresponding translation strategies: domestication and foreignization; The third part is the theoretical framework, divided into two sections. The first section discusses the basic features of film subtitle translation. The second section discusses the issues related to foreignization and domestication; The fourth part combines theories with practice. Concrete analysis with the TV show The Big Bang Theory were given in this part. They are analyses on how to correctly use foreignization and domestication in Chinese and foreign programs in subtitle translation through the specific example.

# II. ON SUBTITLE

"Nowadays the number of dubbed film audiences is far more than that of the translated literature audiences, and the influence of the film subtitle translation for society is not less than the influence of literary translation" (Generations of scholars has revealed the importance of the translation of film subtitles through their hard studies. Now before doing the study of subtitle translation of film and television works, a more comprehensive understanding of the basic knowledge of the subtitle- relevant points is a must, which would be conducive to a more comprehensive and rational discussion on the topic.

#### 2.1 The Definition of Subtitle

When the Chinese audiences watch foreign TV drama, they usually eliminate the language barrier by two popular forms of translation - dubbing and subtitling. Unlike what the dubbing is involved, the subtitle works by the voice tracking, trying to follow the original dialogue, which is an instant message. It is the original talking and lip movement that form the original dialogue, and subtitle is the visual version.

The Chinese 字幕, translated as subtitle in English, refers to the text form of the dialogue involved in TV shows, films and stage works and other non-videos programs, and also refers to the post-processing text of those works. Sometimes, the Chinese 字幕 is also translated as caption, which means a kind of presented text appear on screen the same time when movies or TV dialogues are translated. Dialogue subtitles of film and television works, generally appear in the bottom of the screen, while play subtitles, may be shown on both sides of the stage or above.

# 2.2 The Functions and the Restrictions of Subtitle

Subtitle has two prominent features, one is to help the audience to better understand the conversation. For example, to understand some puzzling caused by the language barriers and cultural differences; the other is a

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supplement of the missing lines of information for the audience when the lines move too fast, the audience cannot digest the fleeting dialogue within the short and limited time. Subtitle appears on the screen and the audience scans or reads it, so they can fully understand the plot. In other words, the subtitle is a kind of something ensuring that no one miss the talks between actors. Subtitle translation is the conversional process which converts the spoken language and body language into text, and the original language into the target language.

Subtitle should consider boundaries of time and space, which is no more than two lines of text and each line also has a maximum number of words. And in general, this line of subtitle information must cover all of the dialogue information contained in the entire screen at that moment, and it must keep up with the speaker's speaking speed for dialogue. In general, compared with two lines of subtitle, a line is more easier for the audience to follow. For each line, Fotios Karamitroglou (1998) suggested that each line should be limited no more than 35 characters, because the caption should be accommodate and conform to the spoken text, in addition, the convenience of viewing audience should be considered too. The most important thing is to decrease more omissions of the source text. In addition to the space constraints, subtitles are also affected by time (Karamitroglou, 1998: 5). TV is constantly continue to play, which means that the subtitle is instantaneous. Subtitle coexists with vision, if the number of words in a line is inordinate in a short time, audience couldn't remember all, which would effect the coherence and understanding of the whole story. As Guardini (1998) noted that subtitle involves the following aspects: the original sound, the speed of the audience, duration, and editing style of video screen and audio visual drama and so on (Guardini, 1998: 97). This further indicates that subtitles are not allowed to be edited by the film and television producer but by the original film program.

In view of the above characteristics and constraints of the subtitle, subtitle translation requires the translator to choose a shorter, more flexible sentence to realize the transmission of information in the limited time and space. Subtitle translation is necessary to clear but also to fully express the meaning of what the popular film has conveys, while also taking the following factors into account: the actions of the characters, their facial expressions and so on. In simple terms, a subtitle translation should grasp a principle: by watching subtitles, the audience is able to accept the convey meaning of the film.

#### III. ON CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Living in a new era with the development of information technology, people will promote the mutual development of variety of culture, and make effective and efficient cooperation on common global issues, thus culture will also be globalized. Cultural globalization will be a process of mutual absorption between different cultural groups, and the process of mutual understanding and recognition.

As is known to all, a kind of language must be an inevitable response to a nation's national consciousness and cultural characteristics. As a carrier of a nation's cultural characteristics and cultural information, language is closely linked with the national geographic, ecological environment, historical and cultural traditions, social life, customs and religious beliefs and so on, even they are inseparable. Speaking of the relationship between language and culture, American famous linguist Edward Sapir pointed it out: "culture can be understood as what a society have done and thought about, while language is the concrete expression of ideas." (Sapir, 1921: 223)It clearly indicates the inseparable relationship between language and culture.

Translation is translating the language, that is to say, film translators should not only master the related language, but also to grasp its cultural information. American translation theorist Eugene Nida said: "Translation is the communication between two cultures. For the truly successful translators, to be familiar with two cultures even is more important than to master two languages, because only based on the cultural background does the roles of words make sense." (Nida, 1969: 118) Thus it can be said that any translation is inseparable from culture, not to mention the subtitle translation, a branch of translation. In the study of film translation, therefore, be sure to consider cultural factors.

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#### 3.1 The Equivalence of Translation

It is no doubt that although there are some differences in ways of thinking, religious believes, living habits, living styles and so on around of people of all ethnic groups in the world. It is these factors that constitutes the differences between Chinese culture and western culture, but there are still some common human characteristics among these different ethnic groups. They live on the same planet; some of their experiences about viability and perceptions of the world is similar in many ways. Cultures of various countries have something similar or common. All of these similarities inevitably reflect in their own languages (When talking about TV Shows, it means the subtitle). For example, many English idioms can be translated into an absolute equivalence of Chinese Language:

- (1) a ray of hope 一线希望
- (2) black market 黑市
- (3) at sixes and sevens 乱七八糟
- (4) to look through colored spectacles 戴有色眼镜看
- (5) walls have ears 隔墙有耳
- (6) ivory tower 象牙塔

#### 3.2 The Non-equivalence of Translation

However, most of the country's language exist cultural differences. The existence of any different cultures is unique, which give the national language the different personalities. So there is no doubt that film translation is facing cultural differences, too. These kind of translation is non-equivalence. For example, Chinese are so fond of red that most of what Chinese authors quote in many articles about the colour---红 (red), such as some words and expressions, all have very positive meaning. For instance, 红利 means bonus,红运 means good luck. Also, 红水 means prosperousness in Chinese, while in English, "to roll out the red carpet for someone" refers to a warm and grand welcome for someone's coming. However Westerners' love for red is far less than Chinese people, red also often been linked with bloodshed, violence, fires, dangerous, crime and anger and so on by most Westerners. Take the following for examples: red battle, red light, red alert, to see red, wave a red flag, etc. , these are all derogatory expressions representing something bad.

#### 3.3 Methods in Terms of the Cultural Differences

The above-mentioned content analyzed the inextricably relationship between culture and translation. So the question arises: how to deal with cultural factors in translation practice? In other words, the translator should choose what method in order to deal with the non-equivalence and equivalence translation? This is a matter of common concern, to a large extent whether solving this problem perfectly determines the success of translation.

The differences between foreignization and domestication are based on the perspective of culture, which suggests that different translators have different opinions for the sake of contained cultural empathy. In addition, different translators have different views on the strategic approaches. As a matter of fact, foreignization and domestication not only have differences, but also similarities. In order to maintain the cultural elements of the source language, the foreignization is usually the preferred strategy, while in order to meet the cultural norms of the target language, word-by-word translation, also called literal translation, usually do not work at all, so domestication should be considered. Whatever, it should be clear that either domestication or foreignization are classified from the perspective of cultural point of view. The culture is the key and should be thought highly of.

# IV. THEORETICAL BASIS

# 4.1The Basic Characteristics of Subtitle Translation

In essence, subtitle translation is the same with other forms of text translation: The fundamental task is to express the primitive meaning of the original language with the target language. However, to have a good command of using specific strategies in film translation, a good translator must also recognize its particularity.

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This section highlights the literariness of TV and film subtitle translation.

# 4.1.1 The Language Expression

The language of film and television work, including dialogue, monologue, narration, or other style, are organic component part of the unity with sound and picture. Therefore, language translation, no matter what kind of expression to take, still has no integrity, also known as Context Restrictions. In other word, that subtitle translation does not pursue meaningful independence, but meet the "readers" accompanied with their viewing behavior, the subtitle itself has no value of reading at all.

Subtitle translation is introduced in the first chapter in detail, such as various restrictions leading to subtitle characteristics, would not repeat here.

#### **4.1.2 Information Dissemination Function**

Subtitle translation aims to translate emotion, the goal is to let the audience have the aesthetic enjoyment on the basis of understanding the TV shows or films. Therefore, the translation must have the information dissemination functions with some critics charming.

Involved in the film and television works there are abundant knowledge and information from all aspects of life. For example, *the Big Bang Theory* contains a large number of physical, chemical and other scientific knowledge, the translator should fully understand the accurate express concepts firstly, then translate it out so that not only could ordinary viewers understand the plots, but also could they learn some scientific knowledge. If so, the translation version could achieve good social communication effects.

In addition, film and television subtitle translation can solve some problems caused by lack of culture.

#### **4.2Domestication and Foreignization**

#### 4.2.1The Concept of the Domestication and Foreignization

The two academic terms--- domestication and foreignization are created by famous American translation theorist Lawrence Venuti (1995) in *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*.(Lawrence Venuti,1995: 98)In fact, as far backas 1813, German translation theorist Schleiermacher in his essay *On The Different Methods of Translating* put forward: "the translator, try not to disturb the original author, letting the reader be closer to the author" (that is, foreignization translation), "or try not to disturb the reader, letting the author be closer to the reader" (that is, domestication translation)(Schleiermacher, 1813:95).*In The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, domestication and foreignization these two basic concepts were explained for the first time.

Generally speaking, translators can choose different strategies according to the actual situation. Among these translation strategies, the domestication translation regards the target language or the viewer as the reference object, conveying the original content with some expressing ways to which the target language readers are used. That is to say, this kind of strategy reduces the strangeness, between target language readers and foreign text and culture, to a minimum level, so that the translation could be smooth and easy to understand. Foreignization translation, by contrast, regards the source language and the original text as the first consideration for the translated version. In order to save the characteristics of the source language and expression and show the differences in language and culture of the foreign text, this kind of strategy directly translates the text into the target language, letting the viewer feel the exotic atmosphere and the culture of other countries and seek for new experience, which will play a better role in spreading culture.

#### 4.2.2The Dispute of Domestication and Foreignization

The battle over domestication and foreignization has a long history; Chinese scholars also have had disagreement for domestication and foreignization for a long time.

Traditionally, domestication strategy keeps dominating, these famous translators as Yan Fu, Lin Shu,Fu Lei, and Qian Zhongshu were all tended to this strategy. Yan once has said "the ideal translation is compared to the original author (in Chinese) writing." (严复, 1898:76) Another well-known translator Fu Lei was a faithful follower of foreignization in translation. He believed that "translation must be exotic which is the

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so-called Western style. In fact, there will not be completely domesticated translation in the world, if there is, it will be dubious and cannot be called a real translation if it is strictly distinguished." (傅雷, 1984:80) Since the Reform and Opening Up Policy has been implemented, foreignization translation has been getting more and more attention by people.

In the process of translation, foreignization and domestication translation strategies should be taken into consideration according to the different situations since both of them have their own merits.

#### V. ANALYSES ON SPECIFIC EXAMPLES

The study version is provided by the Sheldon Subtitle Translation Group.

# 5.1 Domestication Strategy

#### **5.1.1 Replacement**

The so-called replacement method is to use the synonyms and near-synonyms or wording again which all belong to the target language to correspond to the original language and replace them to meet the need of style or expression.

Example1:

Sheldon: At our committee meeting, Amy made a motion for a picnic in a park, but I tacked so many amendments on that thing, it sank like a lead balloon. (在我们的委员会会议上,Amy提议去公园野餐,但我进行了多次修改,那个提议就石成大海了。)

Amy: I then suggested a pub.(于是我就建议去酒吧。)

Example2:

Howard: Okay, booing isn't gonna make it go any faster!(拜托, 你们嘘它, 它也走不快呀!)

Example3:

Sheldon: Oh,boy,if there is one thing that gets my goat, those dad-gum insurance companies.(我的天, 如果有一件事让我发火, 就是那些讨厌的保险公司。)

Example4:

Sheldon: He is right. And given that you're probably still waiting to be picked for a game that was played in fifth grade, I'm sure you do suck. (他是对的, 考虑到你应该还在盼着被选入五年级棒球队中, 你不渣谁渣。)

The above examples include some culture-related words and expressions, such as: Chinese idiom, Chinese popular online slang, American slang... "it sank like a lead balloon", "booing", "dad-gum", "I'm sure you do suck" are replaced by those following Chinese expression: 石沉大海、嘘、讨厌的、你不渣谁渣. Different habits and customs make these differences, so the replacement method is the best choices.

#### 5.1.2 Annotation

Annotation method is an important compensatory translation method, marking notes on the upper part of the screen. It is also called the "Interpretation" originated from the target language in the process of bilingual conversion.

Example 1:

Sheldon: Thinking caps on. Here we go. (进入思考模式,开始吧。)

Raj: Ooh, this is exciting. We are innovating. I felt like we are in the Facebook Movie.(哦, 真鸡冻。我们创新。好像在演电影"社交网络"。在屏幕上方加注:讲述Facebook创始人的创业史电影。)

Example 2:

Howard: My cousin has a cabin out in the woods. (我表哥有个丛林小木屋。)

Sheldon: I'm not going to a cabin in the woods. Did you see the movie Cabin in the Woods? (我不去林中小屋。年没看过《林中小屋》那个电影吗?加注:悬疑片)

Leonard: Then we will go to a hotel. (那我们就住旅馆。)

Sheldon: A hotel? Did you see The Shining? (旅馆?你没看过"闪灵"吗?在屏幕上方加注:恐怖片。)

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Raj: We could go up to Big Bear and get a house on the lake. (我们可以去大熊湖住湖滨小屋。) Sheldon: Did you see The Lake House?(你没有看过《湖边小屋》吗?加注:美版《触不到的恋人》。)

The above examples shows that although the original viewers can immediately response the internal meanings, there are still some Proper Nouns that the target viewers do not know the deep meanings. So, translators should not only translate them out, but also give some annotation.

In example 1, they are talking about doing something value for Science together, Raj describes their action as Facebook Movie, it is clear that the American viewer could get the point, while foreigners do not know what is the movie talking about, so it is annotated on the screen: Facebook Movie, 讲述Facebook创始人的创业史电影。Example 2 is the same with example 1, which gives more introduction on these moves.

#### 5.1.3 Liberal Translation

Liberal translation method refers to keeping the meaning of the original contents, but does not keep the original form, giving audience a better and more vivid visual enjoyment.

Example 1:

Amy: You guys just met. Why would she feel that way? (你们才刚认识,为什么她会不喜欢你呢?)

Penny: It's just this vibe I got. (我就算是有着这种直觉。)

Amy: I'm sure you are worried about nothing. (我敢肯定你想多了。)

Amy and Penny have just make a new friend. Penny claims that she does not like herself. However Amy let Penny stop this idea, "我敢肯定你想多了" is a vivid version.

Example 2:

Leonard: What? Why didn't you say that first? (什么?你为什么不早点告诉我?)

Sheldon: Why didn't you get extra peanut sauce? (那你为什么不多要一份花生酱?)

Leonard: ..... (摔门而去)

Sheldon: We can both play this game. (你不爽我,我也可以不爽你。)

"你不爽我,我也可以不爽你。" does not keep the original caption form, while it is more suitable to express Sheldon's angry.

Example 3:

Amy: Great. And while we are at it, maybe we could butch up your run for when you head out to the mound. (很好,等下我们练习的时候,也许还能调整下你跑向投手丘的跑步姿势,更有男子气概些。)

Howard: What's wrong with the way I run? (我跑步的方式有什么问题?)

According to what Amy expresses with her imitating the posture of Howard, the story means to reveal that Howard is sissy, so "更有男子气概些" is a better translation.

Example 4:

Penny: I said I will get ti it. (我说了我会看的。)

Amy introduced a job to Penny, then there is some related data that Penny should have known before.

If it is directly translated in Chinese word by word: 我说了我还得到它。Audience didn't know what happened, so translator used a flexible expression conveying the meaning of the dialogue. Due to the readers' lack of understanding of the relevant background, the former is confusing, and the latter is very vivid, letting the reader immediately know that Penny was impatient and unhappy that time.

In conclusion, when it comes to some expressions related to the culture, the domestication strategy is a bit better than the foreignization strategy.

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#### 5.2 Foreignization Strategy

#### **5.2.1 Literal Translation**

When using the literal translation method, the original cultural images is retained in the translation, which is helpful for readers to understand another language.

#### Example 1:

Raj: Emily, you know almost everybody here. This is Lenoard, this is Penny. (Emily, 这里所有人你几乎都认识, 这是 Lenoard, 还有Penny。)

Emily: Oh, it's so nice to meet you.(哦, 很高兴认识你们。)

#### Example 2:

Sheldon: Do you know the word "winer" comes from the German name of the Austrian capital Vienna, or "Wien"? (你知道"维也纳香肠"这个词是来自于奥地利首都的德国名字维也纳吗?)

#### Example 3:

Sheldon: Oh, my God. (哦, 上帝。)

People in most of the English-speaking countries believes in Christian, whose influence on the film and TV Series is quite huge. In recent years, Chinese is familiar with these religious elements. So the word "God" was translated as "上帝", which is accepted by Chinese people. Equally, audiences are familiar with their names, too. Translator could translate Lenoard as Lenoard, winer as 维也纳.

#### 5.2.2 Transliteration

Transliteration method, as its name implies, is to adopt transliteration to words in the original text. It is mainly used in the translation of proper nouns, such as person names, place names, etc. Cultural vacancy cannot be described clearly with one or two words, because it is necessary to use words that have similar pronunciation in target language to translate the original words, even there is a tendency to borrow the pronunciation directly from the original word, such as the very popular word "大妈" (Da Ma).

# Example 1:

Sheldon: Well, I'll just Google "hot, dark and moist", see what comes up.(我谷歌一下"火辣,阴暗,潮湿",看看能搜到什么。)

#### Example 2:

Amy: I then suggested a pub. (于是我建议去酒吧。)

Sheldon: Yeah, which I was initially skeptical of until I saw online that they serve YorkShire Pudding. (没错,对此我一开始也持怀疑态度,直到我在网上看到他们有约克郡布丁。)

#### Example 3:

Penny: I guess that makes you the athlete of the group. (那你就是你们哥几个中唯一的运动健将咯。)

Sheldon: Well, not just him! May I remind you that you're talking to the seeker, beater, chaser and water boy of the third place Griffith Park Quidditchteam.(不单他一个人,好嘛?记好了,现在和你交谈的分别是格里菲公园魁地奇季军队中的找球手,击球手,追求手以及茶水工。)

# Example 4:

Raj: Go check out how Florida is. (去看看弗罗里达如何。)

Translator translates "Google", "YorkShire Pudding", "Griffith Park", and "Florida" as "谷歌", "约克郡布丁", and "弗罗里达" directly. These translations save the space and avoid the loss of information, allowing the audience to better understand the plot.

The foreignization strategy is more suitable for promoting cultural exchanges.

# VI. CONCLUSION

For a long time, the battle of domestication and foreignization strategies has never stopped, some scholars even choose only one type of strategy in the translation extremely and stubbornly. But through the above analysis, it

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could get the conclusion that foreignization and domestication strategies both have advantages and disadvantages, only reasonably use both of them can the translator make the translation more perfect. The purpose of film and TV series subtitle translation is to convey the meaning expressed in the original programs to the target language audience, flexible use of the strategy is a wise choice, and extreme view is hard to be accepted and understood by the audience and the scholars.

In fact, the status of the domestication strategy and foreignization strategy depends on the real situation involved in the process of translation, which has the relative independence and itself there is nothing could be compared.

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