Subtitle Translation of *The Big Bang Theory* Based on the Functional Equivalence Theory[*]

WANG Jie, ZOU Jianling

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

Since *The Big Bang Theory* was introduced to our country, it has been warmly welcomed. It is its unique contents, characters of distinctive personalities, and humorous dialogues that enable it to be one of the most popular sitcoms now. The success of *The Big Bang Theory* is not only because of its own artistic charm but also because of its skillful and accurate subtitle translation. Chinese audience can learn about social values of foreign countries and also improve their oral English through subtitle translation. Therefore, subtitle translation is especially important. The thesis takes the subtitle translation of *The Big Bang Theory* as the example to analyze how subtitle translation helps audience to understand and enjoy the humorous dialogues from the perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory. Based on exemplification, the thesis discusses the principles and procedures in the subtitle translation from the aspects of linguistic, stylistic, and cultural equivalence to help people to better understand the subtitle translation and promote Chinese-English cultural communication.

Keywords: The Big Bang Theory, subtitle translation, Functional Equivalence Theory, sitcom

Introduction

As globalization has been more and more prevailing, people of different countries tend to have more communication in many ways. Chief among them is the prevalence of TV sitcoms. With the spread of foreign TV sitcoms, people have learned more about foreign cultures and improved the cultural communication with the west. Zhao Chunmei (2002) pointed out that the cross-cultural communication was much important in translating process. Language translation could also be considered as a process of cultural translation (p. 49). Obviously, the subtitle translation, which is a process that turns the source language into the target language in the written form, plays a quite important role. It enables people to have a better understanding of the information in the TV series and cultures of other countries. However, there are still a lot of difficulties for target audience because of cultural differences. Shao Wei (2009) explored the characteristics of subtitles and pointed out that the Functional Equivalence Theory played a guiding role in subtitle translation (p. 89). Cao Hongyan (2013) had done a case study of the English-Chinese translation of subtitles in many foreign films on the basis of Functional Equivalence Theory. She held the point of view that there is not a certain standard for a perfect translation and all Nida's

argument is a realistic purpose (p. 156).

The thesis shows a case study which focuses on the subtitle translation of *The Big Bang Theory* on the basis of the Functional Equivalence Theory. Summing up the experience from the overseas and the domestic studies of the Functional Equivalence Theory, the thesis gives the specific examples of the application of the Functional Equivalence Theory from the aspect of linguistic, stylistic, and cultural equivalence to study the main principles and procedures of the subtitle translation. It suggests that the Functional Equivalence Theory is appropriate to be used in the subtitle translation.

Functional Equivalence Theory

The English translation theorist Tyler (2005) concluded that a successful translation has the virtue of the original work and transfuses it into the target language completely and the writing style should be the same as the original composition and the translation should be as fluent as the original work (p. 8). Baker (2004) held onto textual equivalence which puts the equivalence between a source language text and the target language text into the first place. She believed that the comprehension of the original text should be the translators' concern to make the target language receptor get the information of the original one (p. 35). Eugene A. Nida who was the famous translation theorist in America introduced a new theory of translation in 1969. That was the Functional Equivalence Theory. Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory is different from other traditional translation theories which chiefly emphasize the correspondence in lexicon and grammar between the source language and the target one. It focuses on the response of the readers. In Nida's mind, if one seeks for the most appropriate translation, the closet natural equivalence is necessary for him to reach (Nida 2003, p. 24). Nida also argued that expressing the meaning of the original text into the target language should be the most important thing in translating process. And a good translation should enable the target language receptor to get a similar response as the source language receptor from the original text (Nida & Taber, 2004, p. 42). To the field of translation, Nida's Functional Equivalence Theory opens a door to a brand new world.

In accordance with Nida's translation theory, Functional Equivalence Theory has two definitions from his book *Language and Culture Contexts in Translating*. They are minimal definition and the maximal definition, which refer to the effectiveness on the basis of the cognitive and experiential factors. The minimal one has the meaning that the target language readers should be able to understand the text as how the source language readers feel about it. While the maximal definition of Functional Equivalence Theory states that the target language readers should be able to comprehend and appreciate the text in the same manners as the source language readers did (Nida, 2001, p. 87).

By giving two different degrees of definitions, the minimal definition and the maximal definition, he opened a door to a brand new world to the field of translation, which made not only the domestic researchers and scholars but also the overseas ones tend to accept and apply the theory to translation.

Analysis of the Subtitle Translation of *The Big Bang Theory*

This part will present analysis of the subtitle translation of *The Big Bang Theory* by first giving brief introduction of the American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*, and then giving the specific examples of the application of the Functional Equivalence Theory in it from the aspect of linguistic, stylistic, and cultural

equivalence to study the main principles and procedures of the subtitle translation.

Linguistic Equivalence in Subtitle Translation

Linguistics is a subject which takes human language as the object of study, to explore the structure of language, use of language, social function and historical development of language, and other language-related issues. It includes grammar, phonetics, semantics, pragmatics, and morphology. Most subtitle translations involve semantic and pragmatic aspects, sometimes involving phonetic aspects. The following is mainly discussed about these three aspects.

Phonetic equivalence. Phonetics studies the pronunciation of human language, involving language pronunciation mechanism, voice characteristics, and changes in the law of speech. It includes a set of methods and systems that describe speech and those associated theoretical construction. English belongs to the Indo-European language and Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language. Therefore, English and Chinese are totally two different languages. From the technical aspect, English-Chinese translation must be difficult to fully realize the phonetic equivalence and the subtitle translation of *The Big Bang Theory* is no exception. Only some of the proposed onomatopoetic words can reflect the similarity between English and Chinese phonetics.

Example 1:

Howard: Exactly. I'll bet there's something around here that could be a lehver.

Sheldon: Everybody hold on! Let's take this problem one step at a time. First, we need to decide whether we're calling it leever or lehver. And the sooner we decide it's leever, the sooner we can roll up our sleeves not slehves and get to work.

Leonard: We're gonna be here "foreever."

霍华德："对，附近一定有东西能做杠棍。"

谢尔顿："等等，我们慢慢地来解决这个问题。首先，我们要决定叫杠杆，还是叫杠棍。等决定了叫杠杆，我们就可以撸起袖子，而不是舅子进行工作了。"

莱纳德："我们要'允远'留在这鬼地方了。"

In this episode, the tire of the van burst and Sheldon comes up with the Archimedes principle, so they begin to find a lever. It is known to all that the letter "e" can be pronounced as /i/ or /e/ in the words. Howard pronounces the word "lever" in the second way. However, Sheldon is so serious and stubborn that he insists on correcting Howard's pronunciation. According to Nida's theory, the translator needs to enable the target audiences to have the same feeling with the source audiences. In order to achieve it, adaptation strategy is used to translate the original words. For example, the "lehver" is translated into "杠棍", the "slehves" is translated into "舅子", and the "foreever" is translated into "允远". It is appropriate that the words of false pronunciations are translated into the other words which have the similar pronunciation with the origin words.

Semantic equivalence. Semantics studies the meaning of natural language. Natural language takes word, phrase, sentence, text, etc. as the language units. The purpose is to find out the regularity of semantic expression and the individuality and commonality of different languages in semantic expression. The same expression in different contexts will have different meanings, so combining the context to analyze the meaning of language is particularly important. In the subtitle translation, the translator must first understand the exact meaning expressed by the source language, and then choose the most proper expression in the target language.

Example 2:

Sheldon: Would you mind opening the door and then angrily slamming it behind me?

Leonard: Sure. Thank you. And slam it hard, because I am pretty steamed.

Sheldon: All right, Leonard, hang in there. Talk to you tomorrow.

谢尔顿："可以帮我开个门然后在我出门后帮我生气地甩门吗？"

莱纳德："好，多谢，因为我火冒好几丈了。"

谢尔顿："好，莱纳德，撑着点啊。明天见。"

In this conversation between Shelton and Leonard, Sheldon is mad at Leonard since Leonard does not persuade Amy to reconcile with him. The phrase "pretty steamed" which means "蒸熟的" is translated as "火冒好几丈", helping the audience to better understand.

Pragmatic equivalence. Pragmatics focuses on how the speaker takes certain actions to achieve a certain purpose, studying the purpose of human behavior and its understanding. Utterance meaning is not static, and will change in different context. Therefore, the translator should pay attention to the pragmatic meaning in the dialogue, to ensure that the translation lines can bring the same utterance meaning to the target language audience.

Example 3:

Howard: Come on, admit it? We got you, Sheldon.

Sheldon: Please!

霍华德："赶紧承认吧!我们吓到你了，谢尔顿。"

谢尔顿："算了吧!"

This is the conversation between Shelton and Howard. Howard makes a terrible joke with Sheldon. Sheldon is slightly frightened to some extent, but because of self-esteem, he is reluctant to admit the truth. So translating "Please!" into "forget it!" appears to be much appropriate. The translator does not translate the original words straight out, but accurately conveys the original meaning of the original dialogue.

Stylistic Equivalence in Subtitle Translation

According to the Functional Equivalence Theory, in order to enable the target language audience to have the same feeling with the source language audience, style is also one of the important factors which translator should pay attention to. In the film and television works, language style can cause the most direct impact on the audience. By combining the stylistic features with the specific context, the characters and themes can be understood more thoroughly.

Omission. Omission means that some words or statements are omitted in the translation. In spoken English, repetitive words often appear. When translating English, some of the necessary words in the source language should be redundant. Therefore, it is necessary to omit some redundant words in order to achieve the same spoken effect.

Example 4:

Amy: Well, this isn't a crisis. Why don't you just let your hair grow out a little?

Sheldon: Why don't I let my hair grow out?

艾米："这有什么大不了的。让头发长长点啊。"

谢尔顿：“为什么？”

In this conversation between Amy and Sheldon, it is clear that the translator omits Sheldon's reply, but maintains the integrity of the target language and source language content. Such translation is more concise and clear, and the subtitles are more short and clear. Needless to say, the translator succeeded in using functional equivalence.

Amplification. Amplification means that some necessary words are added in the translation so that the translation can convey the deep meaning of the sentences. In spoken English, statements are often concise. If translated into Chinese, the sentence must be added completely to ensure the integrity. Therefore, in order to reflect the characteristics of Chinese spoken language, the translator must add some information in the translation to show the implied meaning in the source statements.

Example 5:

Sheldon: "You may actually believe you're in a comedy club."

谢尔顿：“你都会觉得自己是在德云社听相声。”

The phrase "in a comedy club" in the original dialogue is quite concise. If the translator translates the phrase such briefly, then the translation is very weird to the native Chinese audience. Therefore, translating the phrase into "在德云社听相声" is more conducive to the understanding of the Chinese audience.

Cultural Equivalence in Subtitle Translation

In translation, the source language and the target language culture are sometimes similar and sometimes completely different. When the two cultures are similar, it is easier to understand the original text. When two cultures conflict with each other, translation becomes difficult. So, the translator must make some adjustments in the translation to make up for cultural differences between different regions. In this way, the target language audience can understand the cultural connotation in the source language.

Local dialect. Many of the film and television drama will use dialect to enhance humor. As for the translation of dialects, the translation should not only reflect the characteristics and connotations of the source language, but also make the target audience understand easily.

Example 6:

Penny: Well, honey, you know, now that Leonard and I are married, it's kind of makes sense that we actually live together.

Sheldon: So that's all this day was? A plan to better me up before delivering bad news?

Leonard: Come on, buddy.

Sheldon: No, I thought we were friends.

Leonard: Sheldon, please, we already feel bad about this.

佩妮：“亲爱的，既然我和莱纳德已经结婚，那真住一起也合情合理啊。”

谢尔顿：“原来今天是这么个节奏，先礼后兵，图穷匕见。”

莱纳德：“兄弟，别这样。”

谢尔顿：“少来这套，我还以为我们是朋友呢。”

莱纳德：“谢尔顿别这样，我们本来就过意不去了。”

Sheldon is Leonard's roommate and he relies much on Leonard. When he knows that the couple plan to live together, leaving him alone, he feels very angry and disappointed. The expressions such as "这么个节奏", "少来这套", "过意不去", and so on make the translation more fluent to be accepted by the Chinese audience.

Four-character phrases. Four-character phrases are part of fixed phrases in Chinese vocabulary. They reflect the major feature of traditional Chinese culture. Using four-character phrases will make translations more authentic and allow audience to understand the meaning of the source statements both quickly and accurately.

Example 7:

Sheldon: Well, marriage must agree with you. Well, you are just glowing.

Leonard: I'm not glowing. I'm upset.

谢尔顿："婚姻太适合你了，你整个人容光焕发啊。"

莱纳德："我才没有容光焕发，我是不爽到炸。"

Although it is in the oral dialogue, the translation is very consistent with the situation at that time. The four-character phrases are much graceful and dignified that leave the audience a deep impression.

Proverbs. The proverb is a concise and easy-to-understand discourse in Chinese folklore. Proverbs can enhance vividness of the language. In subtitle translation, the use of proverbs will make the Chinese audience feel more cordial.

Example 8:

Penny: You killed my pig? When?

Penny's father: Oh...ten, 12 months ago.

Penny You didn't tell me for a year?!

Penny's father: Well, apple doesn't fall far from the tree, does it?

佩妮："你弄死了我的猪？什么时候的事？"

佩妮的爸爸："大概10到12个月之前吧。"

佩妮："你瞒了一年都不告诉我吗?"

佩妮的爸爸："哈哈，有其父必有其女，对吧"

In this conversation between Penny and her father, Penny calls to tell her father her marriage with Leonard few days ago. She is afraid that her father would blame her, however her father does not and tells her another thing which happened long time ago. The sentence "apple doesn't fall far from the tree" is translated as "有其父必有其女". In this case, the use of Chinese ancient proverbs for translating cannot be more appropriate.

Conclusion

This thesis studies the subtitle translation of *The Big Bang Theory* on the basis of the Functional Equivalence Theory. It gives the specific examples from the aspect of linguistic, stylistic, and cultural equivalence to study the main principles and procedures of the subtitle translation. It can be concluded that there are three types of equivalence commonly used in subtitle translation. First, from the linguistic aspect, phonetic equivalence, semantic equivalence and pragmatic equivalence are often applied in translation to enable the target language audience to have the same feeling with the source language audience. Second, from the stylistic aspect, the translators always use the strategies of omission and amplification to enable the characters and themes to be understood more thoroughly. Third, from the cultural aspect, it is necessary to make some adjustments in the

translation to make up for cultural differences between different regions to make the target language audience understand the cultural connotation in the source language. The emphasis is putting on local dialect, four-character phrases, and proverbs. Therefore, the Functional Equivalence Theory has its own importance and significance to be used in the subtitle translation. It is important for the translators to realize that the first thing in translation is how to restore the original message and then the form. Translators need to fling off the restraints of the form and create vivid translation to help audience to better understand the sitcom. And they must pay attention to not only the expression of grammar and lexicon but also the conveyance of linguistic, stylistic, and cultural aspect. Besides, translators have to apply different strategies from the three aspects above for better appreciation of the audience on the subtitle translation. Thus, the translators can grasp the essence of the theory and use it correctly to provide guidance and reference for translation work.

References

Baker, M. (2004). *Routledge Encyclopedia of translation studies*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

Cao, H. Y. (2013). On the Embodiment of Functional Equivalence in Film Subtitling Translation. *Cinematic literature*, (3), 156-157.

Nida, E. A. (2001). *Language and culture contexts in translating*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

Nida, E. A. (2003). *Language, culture, and translation*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

Nida, E. A., & Taber, C. R. (2004). *The theory and practice of translation*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

Shao, W. (2009). Enlightenment of Functional Equivalence Theory on Film Subtitling Translation. *Journal of Xi'an International Studies University*, (2), 89-91.

Tyler, A. (2005). *Essay on the principles of translation*. Boston: Harvard University.

Zhao, C. M. (2002). Four major contradictions in the translation of translated films. *Chinese Translators Journal*, (4), 49-51.