



A study on the subtitle translation of the American TV series *Person of Interest* from the perspective of skopos theory

Hongyu BAO

School of Foreign Languages, Jiangxi University of Finance and Economics, Nanchang 330013, China

Abstract: With the rapid development of artificial intelligence technology, society's concern about its potential negative impacts has increasingly grown. Against this backdrop, the American TV series *Person of Interest*, with its avant-garde exploration of the risks associated with the application of artificial intelligence technology, has once again come into focus. The series not only showcases the relationship between artificial intelligence and privacy protection but also delves into the potential conflicts between machine intelligence and human moral judgment. Its plot setting is closely connected to the current global concerns about artificial intelligence, sparking people's thoughts on the complex relationship between technology and ethics. For film and television dissemination, choosing the appropriate translation theory for subtitle translation is crucial for content transmission. Skopos theory, the core theory of the German functionalist school of translation, provides valuable guidance for film and television subtitle translation. This theory was proposed and developed by the renowned German translation theorist Hans Vermeer in the 1970s. Skopos theory has three rules: the skopos rule, the coherence rule, and the fidelity rule, which complement each other. This paper starts from these three rules of skopos theory and, combined with different cases, deeply analyzes the subtitle translation strategies of the American TV series *Person of Interest* in the hope of offering suggestions and references for such film and television subtitle translations, thereby promoting the improvement and development of film and television subtitle translation.

Key words: subtitle translation; skopos theory; *Person of Interest*

1 Introduction

Under the push of globalization, the cross-cultural dissemination of film and television works has become an important channel for cultural exchange. Among them, subtitle translation, as a bridge connecting the audience with the original work, has a direct impact on the audience's understanding and acceptance of the work. Good subtitle translation can not only help the audience overcome language barriers, understand the content of film and television works, but also convey the cultural connotations of the original work, sparking the audience's thoughts. The American TV series *Person of Interest*, created by Jonathan Nolan and combining elements of science fiction, crime, and mystery, explores deep societal issues such as artificial intelligence, privacy rights, and moral choices. The series has won widespread acclaim globally. This paper will delve into the subtitle translation strategies of *Person of Interest* from the perspective of skopos theory. By

analyzing specific cases, it reveals the guiding significance of skopos theory for the practice of film and television subtitle translation, promoting the continuous improvement and development of film and television subtitle translation practices.

2 Skopos theory overview and its three rules

Skopos theory, an influential translation theory proposed by the German translation scholar Hans J. Vermeer in the 1970s, broke away from the constraints of equivalence theory by integrating the Greek concept of "skopos" with "functionalism", developing into what is known as functionalist Skopos theory. Here, "skopos" refers to the intent and action of translation. Unlike the traditional "equivalence" perspective, skopos theory does not focus on whether the translation is equivalent to the source text or whether the translation is "perfect". Instead, it emphasizes that the translation should, based on an analysis of the original text, aim for the intended function of the translated text and choose the best approach accordingly [1]. That is, translators must be able to select specific translation methods or strategies for a specific translation purpose. The formation and development of skopos theory can generally be divided into four stages: Katharina Reiss's functionalist translation criticism theory, Vermeer's skopos theory, Justa Holz-Mänttari's theory of translational action, and Christiane Nord's theory of function plus loyalty. Skopos theory encompasses three core rules: the skopos rule, the coherence rule, and the fidelity rule. Among these, the skopos rule, as the primary rule, dominates and constrains the other two rules. The skopos rule emphasizes that the choice of translation methods should be based on the intended purpose of the translated text, that is, selecting the most appropriate approach based on a thorough analysis of the original text and the expected function of the translation [2]. The coherence rule, also known as intra-textual coherence, requires the translator to make appropriate adjustments to the translation while ensuring accurate transmission of the original information, to maximize the readability and fluency of the translation in the target culture. The fidelity rule means that there must be intertextual coherence between the original and the translated texts. The fidelity rule dictates that the translation should not only be fluent and coherent but also maintain a certain corresponding relationship to some extent, meaning the translation should be faithful to the original text.

3 The characteristics of subtitle translation

Subtitle translation, typically categorized into intralingual and interlingual subtitles, refers specifically to the translation of interlingual subtitles in common parlance. Interlingual subtitles involve converting the source language into the target language while retaining the original audio of the film or television production. The translated text is then superimposed at the bottom of the screen to facilitate audience comprehension of the content.

3.1 Popularity

The film and television translation, as an increasingly important branch in the field of translation, features a characteristic of popularity in its subtitle translation. This trait primarily stems from the mass media nature of film and television; compared to literary works, film and television productions have lower requirements for the cultural level of the audience, allowing even individuals with limited educational backgrounds to appreciate and understand them. Furthermore, film and television works often serve as family entertainment activities, reaching audiences across various ages and cultural backgrounds [3]. Therefore, subtitle translation needs to cater to both refined and popular tastes, being suitable for all ages by adopting expressions that are close to the everyday language habits of the general public, avoiding overly complex, obscure, or specialized vocabulary to ensure that viewers can quickly and easily understand the subtitle content. Simultaneously, subtitle translation must also match the speaker's identity, personality traits, and the context of the situation to accurately recreate the interactions among film and television characters and advance the plot.

3.2 Spatial and temporal constraints

Subtitle translation exhibits a unique characteristic of spatial and temporal constraints, meaning that subtitles are limited by space on the screen as well as by time. Spatially, subtitles can only occupy a limited area at the bottom of the screen, usually with a maximum number of characters per line. This requires translators to succinctly condense the original text, ensuring that each line of subtitles is of appropriate length to avoid overly long subtitles that could detract from the audience's enjoyment of the visual presentation. Temporally, the display time for subtitles is typically very brief, needing to coincide with the original visual scenes and character dialogues on the screen, constrained by the audio and visual channels. This means the translated content must convey complete information within a timeframe that allows the audience to read and understand quickly. Moreover, the appearance and disappearance of subtitles must align with the start and end of a character's speech, compelling the translator to convey the character's intended emotions to the audience within a limited time.

3.3 Cross-cultural nature

The cross-cultural nature of subtitle translation refers to the process that involves not only the conversion of language but also the bridging of cultural barriers to facilitate cultural exchange. When dealing with cultural differences, translators need to fully understand the source culture and find corresponding expressions in the target language, resorting to paraphrasing, annotations, and explanations when necessary. In reproducing the original language style, translators must recreate the source language's style in the target language, while also adhering to the expressive habits of the target language. The cross-cultural aspect of subtitle translation requires translators to possess not only solid linguistic skills but also a profound cultural literacy, enabling them to find communicative bridges amidst cultural differences and play a positive role in cultural exchange, thus promoting understanding between different cultures.

4 Subtitle translation of the American TV series *Person of Interest* from the perspective of skopos theory

The application of skopos theory in subtitle translation is of paramount importance due to its emphasis on the purposefulness and functionality of the translation activity, which aligns perfectly with the unique challenges and requirements faced in subtitle translation. This section will analyze how these principles are applied in the practice of subtitle translation, focusing on the principles of the skopos rule, the coherence rule, and the fidelity rule, combined with specific cases.

4.1 The application of the skopos rule

In the process of subtitle translation, translators often employ methods such as free translation and addition to adhere to skopos rule, ensuring that the translated text not only aligns with the intended communication goals of the audiovisual work but also conforms to the cultural expression habits of the target language. This approach accurately delineates character profiles and ingeniously propels plot development, thereby enabling the audience to comprehend the film content more easily and significantly enhancing their viewing experience.

Example 1:

Original: I'll grow with her Mr. Reese, just from afar.

Translation: wo hui he ta yi qi bai tou, li se xian sheng, zhi shi tian ge yi fang。

Analysis: The protagonist Finch faces a moral and emotional dilemma due to the artificial intelligence machine he created, which poses a potential threat to everyone associated with Finch. Finch chooses to make his lover Grace believe that he has passed away in order to protect her from harm. In this example, the translator translates "grow old" into "bai tou", concretizing the abstract concept of aging, which is expressive and capable of conveying profound emotions and

meanings within the limited space of subtitles. "bai tou" symbolizes the beautiful vision of a couple growing old together in Chinese culture, resonating better with Chinese audiences. If translated directly as "yi qi bian lao", it lacks impact and fails to portray Finch's kind and selfless character. Translating "just from afar" as "tian ge yi fang" helps to convey Finch's sadness and helplessness of wanting to see his loved one but unable to. Compared to a literal translation like "zhi shi li de hen yuan", "tian ge yi fang" is more concise and expressive, effectively conveying rich emotions and meanings within a limited time frame. Additionally, the combination of "yi qi bai tou" and "tian ge yi fang" forms a strong contrast in the subtitles, resonating more with the audience and facilitating the same psychological response in the target language audience as in the source language audience.

4.2 The application of the coherence rule

To facilitate effective communication and interaction between subtitle translation and the audience, it is essential to adhere to the coherence principle, ensuring that the content is easily understood and accepted within the cultural context of the target audience, thereby driving the plot development.

Example 2:

Original: You are the muscle; Hary is the maestro.

Translation: ni fu ze da da sha sha, ha luo fu ze yun chou wei wo。

Analysis: This line is a quip from Detective Fosco. In the original text, "muscle" refers to physical strength, and "maestro" originally means a musician or conductor, but in colloquial usage, it describes someone with exceptional skill or expertise in a particular field. A literal translation like "ni shi ji rou, ha luo shi yin yue jia" would quickly confuse the audience, disconnecting from the original plot and hindering comprehension. The original text uses "muscle" and "maestro" as metaphors for the division of labor, with one responsible for physical strength and the other for leadership. The translator transforms the nouns from the original text into verbs "da da sha sha" and "yun chou wei wo" to correspond, using expressions familiar to the Chinese audience, ensuring semantic coherence and ease of comprehension. Additionally, this adds a touch of playful humor to the subtitles, consistent with the original light and humorous tone, aligning with Detective Fosco's witty character.

4.3 The application of the fidelity rule

In the process of subtitle translation, the fidelity principle requires translators to accurately convey the original dialogue's meaning without distortion or omission. This includes precise transmission of character lines, emotional expressions, cultural background, and so on. Furthermore, without compromising audience comprehension, translators can retain the original language style and characteristics, allowing viewers to experience the charm and flavor of the original work, thus achieving interlingual coherence.

Example 3:

Original: Curiosity kills cats Mr Reese.

Translation: hao qi xin hui hai si mao de, li se xian sheng。

Analysis: In this context, Mr. Reese is curious about how Finch obtains information about the victims, so he tracks Finch. Later in the conversation, Finch says this line to Reese. "Curiosity kills cats" is a common English idiom, meaning excessive curiosity may lead to danger or trouble. Translating "Curiosity kills cats" into "hao qi xin hui hai si mao de" adheres to the fidelity rule, emphasizing that the translation should remain faithful to the content and style of the original text while considering the target audience and the purpose of the translation, rather than a literal translation. Translating it as "hao qi xin hai si le mao" would not conform to Chinese language habits and result in a stiff translation. Since "hao qi xin hai si mao" is a widely circulated phrase in Chinese, the translator adopted this idiom and added colloquial expressions,

retaining its metaphorical meaning while adhering to Chinese expression habits, thus maintaining the characteristics of subtitles.

5 Conclusion

Subtitle translation plays a crucial role in the viewing experience of American dramas, as effective subtitle translation can help audiences better understand and appreciate the plot developments, character traits, and underlying cultural contexts. In the process of subtitle translation, translators can employ various translation methods to ensure that the translated text accurately conveys the original meaning while adhering to the expression habits of the target language. This article delves into the subtitle translation of the American drama *Person of Interest* from the perspective of the skopos theory. Through specific case analyses, it explores the application of the skopos rule, coherence rule, and fidelity rule in subtitle translation. Guided by the skopos theory, translators can enhance the quality of subtitle translation, enabling audiences to more easily comprehend the audiovisual content. Moreover, by accurately conveying audiovisual information, portraying character images more vividly, and effectively propelling plot development, subtitle translation not only enhances the appeal and dissemination effectiveness of audiovisual works but also contributes to a more immersive viewing experience for the audience.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- [1] Zhang J. 2004. Purpose theory and translation methods. *Chinese Science & Technology Translators Journal*, 1: 35-37+13.
- [2] Reiss K, Vermeer HJ. 1984. *Groundwork for a General Theory of Translation*. Tübingen: Niemeyer.
- [3] Qian S. 2000. Film and television translation: an increasingly important field in the translation domain. *Chinese Translation*, 1: 61-65.