

# A Study on Subtitle Translation from the Perspective of Skopostheorie—A Case Study of Desperate Housewives

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**Abstract:** *With the advancement and development of cross-cultural communication, more film and television works have entered the international screen. Therefore, the subtitle translation as an important cross-cultural communication media, was widely welcomed by the public. On this background, excellent film and television subtitles are particularly important. By using the method of comparative argumentation and exemplification, this paper analyzes the similarities and differences between Skopostheorie and traditional translation theories and takes Desperate Housewives as an example to prove the positive significance of Skopostheorie on the subtitle translation. Studies have shown that film subtitle translation is more targeted and can achieve a multiplier effect under the guidance of skopos theory. Therefore, Skopostheorie has important practical value for the study of movie subtitle translation.*

**Keywords:** *Subtitle translation; Skopostheorie; Desperate Housewives*

## 1. Introduction

With the progress of society and improvement of people's quality, cultural exchanges between China and the West have become increasingly regular. Numerous excellent foreign films and television works have been on the domestic screen, and a large-scale film and television subtitle translation activity has emerged. As a crucial cross-cultural communication bridge, the film and television subtitle translation plays the role of communicating between different cultures and helps the audience understand the customs of foreign cultures[1]. Therefore, it has been widely welcomed by the people. In addition, in the background of globalization, the international development model of modern films has also promoted the development of subtitle translation activities.

A good subtitle translation is able to overcome cultural barriers, show the connotation of films and television works perfectly, bring about the communication and understanding between cultures, and can also effectively propagandize the home culture. For excellent film and television works, although China has a considerable amount of introduction and output, some deficiencies also can be found in subtitle translation. Some words fails to express the meaning, do not respect the cultural and language conventions of the translated language, so the situation of language misunderstanding happens from time to time, which requires us to speed up the relative study of the subtitle translation. With the rapid development of the cultural exchange, tremendous works of foreign classical film and television works have been introduced to China. Examples mentioned in this article US drama Desperate Housewives is one of them. Therefore, subtitle translation has increasingly highlighted its irreplaceable status. In the meanwhile, in order to facilitate the further development of the subtitle translation, the study found that the translation Skopos Theory established by Hans Vermeer in Germany just fits the particularity and complexity of subtitle translation. According to him, translation is a kind of source-based, purposeful and intercultural speech communication. This theory breaks up the restriction of translation theory of Western equivalence translation theory and constructs a theoretical system of diversification of translation standards guided by teleology.

In addition to the introduction and conclusions, this paper can be roughly divided into three parts. To begin with, the author makes a brief introduction to the subtitle translation under the guidance of Skopostheorie. Then the first part introduces the research background of subtitle translation and the analysis of its own situation. The second part elaborates the theoretical framework and its main principles of teleology. The third part enumerates various examples that appear in Desperate Housewives, and analyzes and demonstrates that Skopos Theory has a strong guiding ability for subtitle translation. Therefore, under the impact on today's teleology, it is full of great direction and practical significance to

study the translation of movie subtitles for various styles.

## **2. Subtitle Translation**

### ***2.1. The Characteristics of Subtitle Translation***

Film and television works originally come from life, but are also higher than life. Film and television subtitle translation should not only pursue the authenticity of art, but also pursue the authenticity of life. As the art form closest to our daily life, the language dialogues in film and television subtitles mostly originate from life. The language is spoken in a lively and verbal manner. The sentences are simple, easy to understand, and very close to life. Therefore, the first one characteristic is popularity, and the subtitle translation should also use the colloquial and popular language to express the real information of the movie. Then the second one is simplicity. The typesetting of subtitle translation cannot damage the overall visual effect of the screen, so as not to affect the audience watching the movie. Therefore, the translation must also be pleasing aesthetically. The translator must make sure that viewers can obtain the most legible information in the shortest time. The subtitles for the films and televisions are located at the bottom of the screen. Due to the limitations of the screen space, there are generally no more than two lines. And due to the time constraints, content is fleeting, so subtitles should be simple and easy to understand. The last is cultural communication. The subtitle translation conveys the information of the across-cultural communication, helps the audience to overcome language barriers, understand story plot, and experience heterogeneous culture. Through appreciation of film and television works, viewers can learn about exotic cultures and customs in an intuitive manner.

### ***2.2. The Classification of Subtitle Translation***

Subtitle translation is one of the most specific types of language conversions, which contains the conversion of language and text types and the highly simplified enrichment of texts. Film and television subtitle translation usually refers to the translation of inter-lingual subtitles, that is to keep on the original sound of the film and television[2], the dialogue and the necessary visual information translated into the target language. Inter-lingual subtitle translation refers to interpreting another language symbol with a language symbol between two languages. It refers to the translation of the original language into the target language while preserving the original sound of the film and television, which is located on the bottom of the screen. The other one is the intralingual subtitle. It refers to explain another language symbol with a language symbol within the same language.

### ***2.3. The Significance of Subtitle Translation***

With the globalization of world economy, the film and television subtitle translation, as totally an emerging translation field, has made remarkable achievements. High-quality subtitle translation can span gaps in language barriers and more intuitively display foreign cultural connotations so that the viewers and audiences can better appreciate the film and television works and play a key role in cross-cultural communication. This has even more important significance in the era of great cultural development and prosperity.

The main purpose of subtitle translation is to convey the relevant information to the audience in a specific cultural context under the constraints of time and space. To enable them to better understand and appreciate film and television works, so as to attract more viewers to promote cultural exchanges.

## **3. A Brief Introduction to Translation Skopos Theory**

### ***3.1. The Emergence and Development of Translation Skopos Theory***

Generally speaking, the term of Skopos means the specific objectives in translation, and it can be traced back to the “Skopos” [3], which belongs to the Greek. In order to far from the ambiguity of concepts, Nord raises an important question of the disparity between the words “function” and “intention” (55). In Vermeer’s theory framework of Skopos, the audience takes the crucial position in the purpose of translation. Their knowledge of cultural background, aim of translation and the needs of communication are different from each other. Thus, we can regard the translation as a production for a certain goal, and a particular audience. Vermeer mentioned Skopos Theory in his famous book that “translating ideas based

on the Skopos Theory of translation can exert the true idea of different levels of concept, no matter what culture, context, language habits, or differences in living environment are. In the procedure of language translation, it will exert positive and negative influences in different degrees". This view tells us that high-level translation work is not only to understand literal meaning, but also to realize the ideals expressed by different languages from an ideal state, and to use the cultural functions of the translation itself, so that the translation work will be more in line with the people.

In the 1970s, the theory of functionalist translation was put forward in Germany for first time. It has gone through several stages. At the very beginning, Catherine Rice brought the functional characteristics in the criticism of translation. Then gradually, the translation criticism model can be put out under the limitation between the original language and translated function. Therefore, in her *Possibility and Limits of Translation Criticism*, the embryonic form of functionalist theoretical ideas came up with (66). From her perspective, the ideal translation should have the function of all-around exchanges and communication. However, as a matter of fact, the principle of priority reciprocity is not the real priority but the functional trait. Then, Vermeer raised up the Skopos Theory and founded the fundamental theory belonged the functional school. According to the thought of Fermil, the purpose turns into the highest criterion. The subtitle translation aims to promote the understanding and stimulate the desire of watching. Hence, it is necessary to make a rough idea to the Skopos Theory School. The next one is supported by the Skopos Theory of Weimar. Jiasta Holtz-Mantari drew lessons from the framework of communication and behavior, raised the theory of translation behavior, and moved forward to a single step of the theory of functional translation. This theory has a lot similarity in teleology, and Vermeer later merged them. At the last, Christina Nord gives an overall summary about his theory of functionalism (66).

From the fifties to sixties of the 20th century, western translation theory basically experienced the language development of the course of synchronization. The core of the German functionalist translation theory is the "Skopos Theory" first put forward by Hans Vermeer in *The Framework of Universal Translation Theory* published in 1978 (118). The "action theory" became its theoretical support. This school believes that: (1) Translation must take the various functions of language into account, including cognitive function, expression function, and tool function; (2) Translation must pay attention to the comparison of languages, including the grammar, pronunciation, language style, and literary subject matter (Vermeer 85). Skopostheorie specifically refers to the translation process, not unilaterally based on the appearance and external meaning of words, but on the basis of the surface meaning of words, to promote the translation effect to be more consistent and complete.

The most translation theorists tend to look at translation from the point of view of linguistic. For instance, in the 1960s, the famous American scholar Eugene Nida published in 1947 the *Bible Translation an Analysis of Principles and Procedures with Special Reference to Aboriginal Languages*, and came up with the theory of "dynamic equivalence", which is supported by the help of linguistics, theory of information and semiotics (56). The so-called "functional equivalence" means that during translation, it does not seek the rigid correspondence to the surface of the text, but it must reach functional equivalence between the two languages.

### ***3.2. The Principles of Translation Skopos Theory***

The Skopos Theory mainly emphasizes the purpose of translation and is the core of the German functionalist translation theory. The celebrated principles of Skopostheorie are in the name of Skopos rule, coherence rule and fidelity rule. On this basis, the functionalities, technical character and morality of Skopostheorie in the context of translation market are discovered.

Firstly, Skopostheorie supposes that the first principle followed by all translation activities is the "Principles of Purpose"[4], that is, translation should be able to take into effect on the situation of translation and culture, in the way that the target language recipient expects. These aims can be divided into three sections: (1) the translator's fundamental purpose (such as making a living); (2) the communicative purpose of the translation (such as enlightening the reader); (3) the purpose of the use of a particular translation act. The entire procedure of translation is the method of determining the outcome. Therefore, translators should specify their specific purpose in a given context of translation and decide on which translation method to use based on this purpose. For instance, there are the literal translation, free translation and somewhere.

Secondly, coherence refers to the translation must comply with the criteria of intra-textual coherence, that is, the readability and understandability of the text of translation, enable the recipient to understand and make sense in the context of the translation language and the use of the translation of the

communicative context[5].

Thirdly, the principle of fidelity refers to the state of existing of inter-textual coherence between the source language and the translation. This is equivalent to the fact that other translation theories are faithful to the original text, however, the degree and form of fidelity to the original text takes the decision of the goal of the translation text and the translator's comprehension of the original text[6].

#### **4. The Analysis of Subtitle Translation Strategies for Desperate Housewives Guided by Skopos Theory**

##### **4.1. Domesticating**

Due to cultural differences, sometimes the literal translation of English to Chinese can make the readers of the translated language feel puzzling and even misunderstood. At this time, it is necessary to use the expressions that are similar or identical in Chinese and have their own distinctive cultural expressions to naturalize the original texts. Domesticating translation demands the translator to be close to the target language audience [7]. The translator must like their native speakers. If the author and reader want to have direct dialogue, the translated texts must become the authentic native linguistic. According to the loyalty principle of Skopos theory, domestication translation can be able to help readers comprehend the translation and improve the readability and appreciation of the translation at a high level.

For example:

(1) Bree discovered she had a romantic rival.

From the literal meaning, rival means the competitor in a romantic way. However, to Chinese people, it's hard for them to understand. According to the loyalty principle of Skopos theory, we translate it in Chinese way. Then we call it the competitor in love.

(2) We haven't been able to sleep or eat.

A person who can't get into sleep or eat any food, in this condition, Chinese has exactly one corresponding idiom. We believe it's hard for us to get into sleep. Under the guidance of the loyalty principle, it is able to adapt to this scenario and successfully achieve the transformation and docking of language.

(3) It's like you want to suffer.

In Chinese, it means someone who would like to look for something bad, but actually, you have no necessary to suffer from it. The rule of loyalty can be well represented.

(4) See? The ship has already sailed.

In this example sentence, the original language can find the corresponding idiom in the translated language.

(5) Tell him I apologized, and uh, you and I are good, huh?

This is also an idiom we can find in traditional Chinese culture. It means that no matter what had happened ever, we can be friendly to each other at the moment, and do not call back the terrible memory between us.

(6) We have to tell each other the truth.

To tell each others facts means telling the truth. There is an appropriate idiom in Chinese.

(7) Gabrielle knew she had lost her looks.

This is not the same as the Chinese saying. The Chinese believe that with the passage of time, the face will become old.

(8) I'm telling you, it's impossible to find good help these days.

From the literal speaking, the good help means the positive and helpful help. In Chinese, it means the key help in time. There is just a corresponding idiom in chinese culture.

(9) Maybe we should just bite the bullet and go to Boston.

(10) You're sure we're not gonna humiliate ourselves?

(11) But, boy, was it nice to have somebody in the same boat.

(12) For the whole “getting back on the horse” thing.

From examples 9 to 12, there are the similar situations in the sentence. We are not going to analysis them one by one.

#### **4.2. Omission**

This is a commonly used method in the course of English-Chinese translation. The translator uses the elliptical method on the premise of grasping the basic spirit of the original text. The language of the translation can be expressed more concisely, accurately, and fluently. The elliptical method has its own laws. It is a rule-based, practical translation method. Language obeys the idea and the form obeys the content. This is the principle that must have to abide by the translation [8]. Different languages have great differences in the number of words used. According to the skopos rule of Skopos Theory, in order to make the translations smooth and avoid burdensome, we can omit and translate a few words in translation. Because there is no word in the translation but its meaning, or meaning in the translation is self-evident, which is the omission translation method. However, omitting the content of the original text does not mean deleting it, nor does it arbitrarily break it out of context.

For example:

(1) Of course, there are some people who understand how quickly time passes. That’s why they’re so determined to get what they want before it’s too late.

“To get what they want before it’s too late” has nine words in English, but we all know that subtitle translation has the limitation of the space and time, so the language must be refined. Thus, the idiom of “enjoy pleasure in good time” could overcome the shortcomings, which can make the translation text reach the real aim under the guidance of skopos rule.

(2) Susan: Time to go.

After leaning English, we understand that the complete form of the above sentence. That is, it’s time to go. Just because of the omitting of several words. However, this elliptical sentence is more concise and clear. This is the function of the skopos principle. At the same time, it also conveys the full purpose of the speaker. It is very suitable for subtitle translation requirements.

(3) Time to stop.

People who have some research on English learning, we all know the complete form is that it’s time to stop. So the sentence deletes two words and wants to be more concise through the rule of skopos.

(4) When we started this, you were just as lonely as I was.

This sentence uses the form of “as...as...”, and want to make the sentence more laconic.

(5) I am not going to be humiliated in front of the entire neighborhood. And, just so you know how serious I am...

(6) You three planned this? All right. That’s it. Get out.

(7) Lynette replaced her grief with a much more useful emotion, indignation.

From examples 5 to 7, there are the similar situations in the sentence. We are not going to analyze them one by one.

#### **4.3. Reverse Translation**

On account of English-speaking countries having various history, geography, social and cultural backgrounds, and living habits [9], our people's way of thinking is different from them. The differences are reflected in their language habits, resulting in different expressions of the two languages. When expressing negative meanings, this difference is particularly prominent. Some English sentences are negative in form and essentially affirmative, and some are affirmative in nature and negative in nature. When translating certain film subtitles, the special attention should be paid on two points. Firstly, some words or sentences that are positively expressed can be expressed from the opposite side when translated into Chinese. Secondly, the translator pays attention to the content expressed from the negative in English and can be expressed from the front when translating. But in any form, the purpose of achieving a specific

cultural transmission is the aim of translation. Therefore, this requires the principle of skopos to provide guidance for subtitle translation.

For example:

(1) Okay, but that's only gonna work, like, 500 or 600 more times.

500 or 600 times is an exaggerated number. The purpose is to show that there are many times. So this sentence can be translated from the negative side to show its real significance with the skopos.

(2) Orson, you're still up.

This sentence is a typical positive and negative translation, which can be a good expression of the speaker's surprise. This helps to better convey the emotional information of the speaker and reach the wanted aims.

(3) Can I ask you something, just between us?

To some extent, "just between us" means that the thing we cannot tell the others. There is only two people know it in the world.

(4) The couch is fine. Unm, I just pulled a muscle.

(5) Orson is a horrible negotiator.

(6) Yeah, I get that, but I just wouldn't forgive myself if I don't ask.

(7) -- It's for dads and sons.

--Yes, but it doesn't say moms can't do it, too.

(8) Ok, we've done enough.

From examples 4 to 8, there are the similar situations in the sentence. We are not going to analysis them one by one.

No two languages are exactly the same, regardless of the meaning of symbols or the arrangement of language symbols. It can be said that there is no absolute agreement between the languages. Hence, the necessary translation strategy has a very important significance. And the role of skopos and loyalty is easily highlighted. The strategies of domesticating, omission and reverse translation mentioned above can promote the communication and understanding between the cultures of the two countries so as to achieve the purpose of cultural exchange [10].

## 5. Conclusion

From the above analysis, we can easily draw a conclusion that subtitle translation takes a significant character in cross-cultural communication. At the same time, in the translation of film and television subtitles, teleology is still not out of date and has some guidance ability. Faced with a wide range of translation works, translators should be faithful to the original text on the basis of fully considering the intended purpose of translation and the sustainability of the translation, so as to better satisfy the demands of the audience. In addition, for the translation of Skopostheorie and subtitles, we should treat it with a scientific manner, avoiding errors such as mistranslations and cultural conventions that do not respect the language of the translation. At the same time, translation skopos theory has practical significance for cross-cultural communication and can promote intercultural understanding. Moreover, due to the restrictions of certain conditions, the information conveyed by subtitle translation is more accurate and efficient, and is in line with the fast-paced demands of the current society. Whether it is to express the correct meaning, promote cultural exchanges, or promote the efficient development of translation work in the country, the Skopos Theory has had a huge boost. Under the support of Skopos Theory, people can use specific translation strategies and techniques to convey specific cultural connotations. To a certain extent, it can achieve the purpose of functional equivalence and cultural equivalence. Therefore, it is of great guiding significance to carry out research on movie subtitle translation under the guidance of teleology.

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