On the Chinese Translation of English Online Stand-up Comedy from the Perspective of Eco-translatology

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Abstract. As a carrier of laughter and culture, stand-up comedy is becoming more and more popular with Chinese audience. However, the Chinese translation of stand-up comedy has not received enough attention in translation circle. From the perspective of Eco-translatology, this paper explores the translation strategies of stand-up comedy. By investigating the subtitle translation of online stand-up comedies, it finds that translators employ various translation strategies to convey humorous effects, including the use of cultural annotations, rhetorical devices, and cultural transplantations. It is a new attempt to combine Eco-translatology with the translation of stand-up comedy. It is hoped that the paper could provide a new perspective for the study and improve the quality of stand-up comedy translation, so as to better meet the needs of Chinese audience.

Introduction

Stand-up comedy, originated in the United Kingdom in the music halls of the 18th and 19th centuries and flourished in the United States, is a form of comedy popular in Europe and America. It is usually used by a performer (commonly known as a stand-up comic or stand-up comedian) to make fun of the audience through humorous language, body movements, and facial expressions. Its content is mainly composed of humorous stories, jokes and one-liners typically called a monologue. From the perspective of art form, it is similar to the “dan kou stand-up comedy” (monologue crosstalk) in China. With the popularity of English and the Internet, more and more Chinese netizens will watch online stand-up comedy. The success of the Chinese-American Ph.D. in biochemistry, Joe Wong (黄西) in the US stand-up comedy industry has made many young Chinese netizens interested in stand-up comedy. There are hundreds of millions of netizens in China, and such a large audience determines that the translation of stand-up comedy should receive enough attention.

Research Status of Stand-up Comedy Translation

Although stand-up comedy has been around for a long time, there are not many theoretical studies on its translation. From the perspective of humor, Yan Fen (2011) studied the appreciation and translation of humor in Joe Wong’s stand-up comedy¹; Lei Jing (2012) made quantitative analysis based on humor translation in stand-up comedy²; based on Skopos Theory, Hao Junjie (2014) studied the translation of subtitles of online stand-up comedy³. However, previous studies and investigations of the target language culture are mostly from the whole, and have not been refined to a certain cultural group, so it is liable to draw a rather general conclusion. This article intends to analyze the translation of subtitles of stand-up comedy targeting netizens, which is less touched by researchers in the past, and explores translation strategies in the context of network culture.

From the discussion above we can see that although stand-up comedy is popular in China, the research on the translation practice and theory of subtitles of stand-up comedy are far from enough, which leaves much room for us to make further study. This paper tries to analyse the topic from the perspective of Eco-translatology. Because the available materials are currently limited, the main research objects are translated subtitles of stand-up comedies provided by subtitle groups (native Chinese speakers and most of them are only amateur translators).
Analysis of Stand-up Comedy with Eco-translatology

Translational Eco-Environment of Stand-up Comedy

Eco-translatology was proposed by Hu Gengshen under the guidance of Darwin’s “adaptation and selection”. Eco-translatology believes that translation is “the translator’s selection activity to adapt to the translational eco-environment”. “Translational eco-environment” refers to “the world presented by the original text, the original language, and the translated language, that is, the interconnected and interactive whole of language, communication, culture, society, and authors, readers, and clients”. The translational eco-environment includes both the physical environment and the spiritual environment. It is a collection of multiple factors that restricts the translator’s best adaptation and optimization choices.

The translational eco-environment of stand-up comedy has the following characteristics:

First, the stand-up comedy with Chinese subtitles is mainly transmitted through the Internet;
Second, the translators are so-called “subtitle groups”, who, sometimes, only focus on transmitting the original meanings but fail to remain humorous effect of the original text.
Third, the major audience of stand-up comedy is internet viewers, who have different appreciation habits from traditional media readers, mainly in the following aspects: Firstly, it is entertaining. Many netizens browse online videos for leisure and entertainment. If a video is boring, they will no longer have interest; secondly, to seek novelty and stimulation, the online community has a strong ability to accept, understand and imitate new phenomena, new information and new vocabulary.

Through the analysis of translation eco-environment, it is not difficult to find that the major audience of stand-up comedy translation has higher requirements for translation quality, which means higher requirements for translator’s translation ability. Therefore, guided by scientific translation theories, translators need to learn more about the culture of the target language, improve the quality of stand-up comedy translation and finally adapt to the translational eco-environment of it.

Multi-dimensional Adaptation and Adaptive Selection in the Translation of Stand-up Comedy

“Adaptation” and “selection” are two core concepts of Eco-translatology. The practice of translation includes two steps. The first step is the translator’s adaptation. Translators should fully understand the source text, perfectly adapt to the translational eco-environment, and take the reader’s thinking and feeling into account. The second step is the translator’s selection. Translation text is based on translator’s actively adaptation to the translational environment, but it is the translator that makes final choices. If the translator couldn’t well adapt himself to the translational eco-environment, his choice of the target text would be doomed to fail from the very beginning.

The adaptive selection translation method is “Three-Dimensional Transformation Method”, i.e., based on the principle of “multi-dimensional adaptation and adaptive selection”, the translator should relatively focus on the transformations of linguistic dimension, cultural dimension and communicative dimension. In that sense, a translation text can be evaluated in accordance with this standard, i.e. the more dimensions a translator adapts to the translational eco-environment, the more appropriate the adaptive selection is made according to this, and the more highly integrated adaptive selection of its translation is.

According to the characteristics of the online community and the humorous characteristics of stand-up comedy, we can simply summarize the “translation requirements” of stand-up comedy into two points: First, the translation must adapt to the translational eco-environment, maintain the humorous characteristics of stand-up comedy, and amuse the audience; Second, the translation language should be selective, entertaining and fit the online context familiar to netizens.

Translation Strategies of Stand-up Comedy from the Perspective of Eco-translatology

The comic nature of stand-up comedy determines that its primary characteristic is humor. In order to achieve the humorous effect, stand-up comedians will adopt a variety of verbal and non-verbal
methods, which can be divided into several points: first, the language is exaggerated, and the facts are often exaggerated or enlarged to seek humor; second, various rhetorical techniques are used, such as puns, parallelism, symmetry, rhyme, etc.; third, some artists like to use vulgar, filthy language to pursue the stimulating effect; fourth, oral language and body language closely cooperate together to create humorous effects. Due to the characteristic of humor and to adapt to the translational eco-environment, some special translation strategies are needed.

Transformation of Cultural Dimension: Cultural Annotations with Humorous Background

The adaptive selection transformation of the cultural dimension requires that the translators always pay attention to the differences between the two cultures and use appropriate methods to convey the humor in stand-up comedy to the audience of the target language. Cultural annotations are suitable for providing background information, helping viewers who are not familiar with the culture behind the humor to appreciate it. The comment generally follows the translation or appears in the form of a pop-up window, enclosed in parentheses, indicating that it is a comment. There are also some words that directly indicate “annotations”, “comments”, “funny points” or “cultural background”.

In the following, the first two examples are from Woody Allen’s Las Vegas and Second Marriage respectively, and the third example is from Joe Wong’s stand-up comedy at 2001 Radio & Television Correspondents Association Dinner. Joe Wong himself is a Ph.D. in biochemistry, but he loves stand-up comedy, and has been invited twice to perform on David Letterman Late Night Show.

Example 1
You have to believe me when I say, that there is something seductive about me, when I shoot crap.你们得相信我，我说我掷骰子（又有“吹牛”和“拉屎”的意思）时还是相当富有魅力的。

Example 2
We go into a smoked filled room, and I do not use - you should know this about me - too any sort of consciousness expanding material. My body will not tolerate that.
我们走进烟雾弥漫的房间，可是我不能使用任何的意识扩展物质（大麻），你们也应该了解我这一点。我的身体受不了那个。

Example 3
I think journalism is the last refuge for puns. Only on a newspaper can you see just like, “I was born in the year of the horse, and that’s why I am a neigh-sayer (nay-sayer).” My point exactly.
我觉得新闻业是双关语的最后阵地了。因为只有在报纸上你才能看到类似于“我是属马的，所以你知道为什么我总是像马一样叫（唱反调）。”（美国人形容马叫的象声词是neigh，发音和nay一样，nay-sayer是总要唱反调的人）我表达得很准确。

The cultural background of the stand-up comedy humor is complicated. If you are not familiar with the cultural background of the United States, it is quite difficult to comprehend it. For example, in the first case, “to shoot crap” not only means “to roll the dice”, but also “to boast” or “to shit”, so it is a way of self-mocking and fairly humorous. In the second case, Chinese audience may be puzzled about “consciousness expanding material”, a euphemistic title for marijuana. In the third case, a pun is used to show the onomatopoeia “neigh” as well as its homophone “nay”. The annotations provided by the translator not only contain cultural information, but also explain the funny points, which helps the audience to fully sense the humor.

Transformation of Linguistic Dimension: Clever Use of Rhetoric to Reproduce Humorous Context

The transformation from the language dimension refers to “the translator’s adaptive selection and transformation of the language form in the translation process [7]. Translators should be proficient in the original and target languages, familiar with the overall eco-environment presented by content, make appropriate choices and express humor in appropriate language forms. Ingenious use of Chinese rhetoric means, such as antithesis, homophony, rhyme, etc., can effectively convey the humorous effect and render the atmosphere. A prominent feature of stand-up comedy language is
the use of rhetorical means, and in many cases the humorous effect is brought by rhetorical means. This requires the translator to take into account the rhetorical means of the original text as much as possible when translating, and try to adopt similar rhetorical methods in Chinese. Even if it is difficult to achieve due to language differences, it must try to compensate in other ways. The following examples are taken from Chris Rock’s *Bigger & Blacker*.

**Example 4**
You got pecs, I got Tec.
你有胸肌，我有武器。（antithesis, rhyme）

**Example 5**
You dot to bet your kid on or your groove on. You can’t bet both on at the same time.
生娃不泡吧，泡吧不生娃。（antithesis, rhyme）
The background of Example 4 is gun control. Chris Rock said gun control is not needed, because you don’t have to exercise when you have a gun. No matter how strong you are, you can’t beat my gun. In this sentence, he used the two rhetorical ways of antithesis and rhyme. “Pecs” (胸肌) refers to the pectoral muscles, and “Tec” (武器) itself is the abbreviation of the famous American gun-making company KEL TEC, here used to refer to guns. The use of “武器” (wu qi) to refer to guns is to rhyme with the previous “胸肌” (xiong ji) to achieve a better humorous effect.

Example 5 satirizes that many women in the United States who care about only play not children. “Get your kid on” and “get your groove on” are also rhetorical means of antithesis and rhyme. The Chinese translation of “生娃不泡吧，泡吧不生娃” not only expresses the original sentence exactly, but also uses the antithesis of “泡吧” and “生娃”, and the rhyme of “吧” (ba) and “娃” (wa) vividly and efficiently to reproduce the humorous effect of the original sentence, which is wonderful.

The full application of rhetorical means shows that the translator has a clear understanding of the Chinese context. The comprehensive application of rhetorical means greatly enhances the appeal and humor of the language.

**Transformation of Communicative Dimension: Cultural Implantation Triggering Humorous Effect**

Although generally speaking, to translate foreign cultural elements with local vocabulary, this extremely domestication translation strategy is not rigorous, but the results are occasionally satisfactory. For netizens with strong cultural acceptance and high humor comprehension, the humorous effect of this method is quite good. The following two examples are respectively from Woody Allen’s *The Vodka Ad* and *The Police*.

**Example 6**
My analyst died two years ago, and I never realized it, and now, whenever I have any sort of problem, I consult with my spiritual counselor, who in my case is my rabbi.
我的心理医生两年以前就死了, 可我一直没意识到。现在, 无论我碰到什么样的问题, 我都去请教我的精神顾问, 对我来说就是我的知心姐姐。

In Example 6, “rabbi” is a teacher of Jewish law. To Americans, it’s humorous to call spiritual counselor as “rabbi”, but the Chinese audience know nothing about this background. Thus, a more vivid and humorous way is to replace “拉比” (rabbi) with “知心姐姐” (aunt agony).

**Example 7**
I’m coming home by myself, two o’clock in the morning, and it’s pitch black and I’m all alone, and standing in my lobby is a neanderthal man, with the eyebrow ridges, y’know, and the hairy knuckles like this, y’know.
我独自一人回到家里，凌晨两点，周围漆黑一片，只有我一个人。我的门厅里站着一个北京猿人，他的眉骨高高隆起，指节上也满都是毛，就像这样。

In Example 6, “rabbi” is a teacher of Jewish law. To Americans, it’s humorous to call spiritual counselor as “rabbi”, but the Chinese audience know nothing about this background. Thus, a more vivid and humorous way is to replace “拉比” (rabbi) with “知心姐姐” (aunt agony).

In Example 7, “neanderthal man” is a member of an extinct subspecies of humans, a type of primitive man. By translating “neanderthal man” into “北京猿人” (Peking man), the Chinese audience will immediately understand the meaning of the original text and burst out laughter.
The transformation from communicative dimension requires the translator to focus on the level of communication in addition to the transformation of linguistic information and cultural connotations, and to pay attention to whether the communicative intention in the original text is achieved in the translation \[^7\]. In essence, cultural implantation is a strong cultural act of covering the source language culture with the target language culture. Although this method is effective, it is also criticized because cultural coverage will lead to further separation between the target audience and the source culture. Regardless of this point, as to the transmission of humorous effects, this translation strategy can accomplish the function of humorous communication “with regrets”.

Conclusion

The subtitle translation of online video by is difficult to attract the attention of academia because of its uneven quality. Although translations for online audience are not elegant and difficult to attract the eyes of experts and scholars, there are hundreds of millions of netizens in China, and some stand-up comedy videos have even received more than one million views. Netizens are highly appreciative of their subtitle translation, but they are eager to have accurate, expressive, and creative translations. They are also dissatisfied with poor translation and wrong translation. Such a huge audience should be respected, and translation activities aimed at netizens deserve the attention of translation researchers. As Susan Bassnett said: “Translation research is not a patent for ‘elegant’ literature, and there should be no prejudice against films, electronic media, and oral translation.”\[^{[8]}\]

The humorous translation characteristics of stand-up comedy online subtitles are fundamentally caused by the choice of translator’s translation strategy. As a translator, on the one hand, he hopes that the translation can be faithful to the original text, that is, to express the meaning of the original text; on the other hand, he must also consider whether the translation can achieve the expected function of the text, that is, the function of humor. The paper analyzes the characteristics of the translational eco-environment of stand-up comedy. Starting from the language dimension, cultural dimension and communication dimension, it also analyzes the stand-up comedy’s translation strategy through examples. The use of these translation strategies helps to obtain a relatively high level of “integrated adaptive selection”. Eco-translatology puts forward higher requirements for translators who are dominant in the translational ecological-environment. Only by continuously improving their own level can the translators meet the increasing appreciation needs of the target audience.

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Reference


