

# Analyze Subtitling Translation of *Prison Break* (First Season) from the Perspective of Skopos Theory

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**Abstract:** With the acceleration of reform and opening-up, and development of economic globalization, multicultural exchanges have been strengthened among many countries around the world. As a new way of cross-cultural communication, TV series have helped people from the world to get to know different cultures. And many foreign TV series have got much popular among young people. As a result, subtitling translation has been produced and got prosperous development. This paper takes American TV series, *Prison Break*, as an example to analyze subtitling translation of TV series on the basis of Skopos Theory and its three principles.

**Keywords:** Skopos Theory, Subtitling translation, *Prison Break*.

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## 1. Introduction

With the development of economic globalization, all nations have had a closer connection with each other, thus, multi-cultural exchanges plays an important role in going global. As a cultural carrier, TV series also play an essential part in the process of cultural exchanges, including enhancing national soft strength, people-to-people exchange, and promoting cultural communication and mutual learning. And people pay more attention on this way featured by direct effects and wide influence. For instance, many foreign TV series, such as *Iron Man*, *SpiderMan*, *Modern Family* and *Friends*, become popular among Chinese people after translating and editing by film-making companies. Furthermore, a large number of young people are attracted by their plots with twists and turns, complicated relationships and sophisticated special effects. At the beginning, even though TV translation did not get enough development, many TV fans still wanted to finish that TV series by watching the scene. Later, with the development of the times, a growing number of younger generations would like to feel the real charm of actors and TV series through original soundtrack, however, most of us still have to depend on subtitle translation to learn about the plot due to different languages and cultural background around the world. As a result, subtitling translation becomes a prerequisite in communicating TV series, and its accuracy is directly linked to people's recognition and evaluation on them.

## 2. Description of Subtitles

### 2.1. Definition

Subtitles are non-visual content in the form of text displaying dialogue in television, film, and stage productions, and also generally refer to the post-processed text of film and TV series. The narrative text that appears on the bottom of the movie screen or TV fluorescent screen and all kinds of text, such as the title of the film, the cast and crew list, the lyrics, dialogues, explanatory words with character introduction, place names and dates, etc. are called subtitles. The dialogue subtitles of a film or television series usually appear at the bottom of the screen, while the subtitles of a theatrical production may be displayed on the sides or above the stage.

And usually one subtitle is composed of one or two line at the bottom of the screen without surpassing 35 words.

### 2.2. Classifications

With the development of TV and film industry, there are various types of subtitles nowadays. Here are three classifications to get to know main types of subtitles.

Use of languages—According to the standard, there are pure local-language subtitles, bilingual subtitles and intra-lingual subtitles(the subtitles are in the same language as the film, and the main purpose of the subtitles is to assist the hearing impaired, as well as to take into account dialect differences.)

Function of control—According to the standard, there are closed subtitles which audiences can freely display the subtitle or not through control button, and open subtitles that always display on the screen and cannot be hidden.

Media differences—According to the standard, there are film subtitles, TV series subtitles, music-video subtitles and surtitles.

### 2.3. Requirements

As an old saying goes, “Nothing can be accomplished without norms or standards.” So do the subtitles. As a result, an excellent subtitle needs some specific standards and requirements. First, accuracy—subtitles need avoid wrong words and other low-level errors. Second, consistency—subtitles need keep consistent with the form and narration. Third, clearness—subtitles need narrate the complete audio, including identifying speakers and non-speaking contents, all of these need to be displayed through subtitles in a clear way. Fourth, readability—subtitles need appear long enough to be read by the audience, synchronized with the audio and not obscure the effective content of the picture itself. Fifth, equivalence—subtitles need convey the content and intent of the video footage in its entirety, with equal content .

## 3. Situation and Features of Subtitling Translation

### 3.1. Situation

As we all know, film is silent in the beginning, and mainly relies on body actions and facial expressions of actors and

actresses to finish. Sometimes, a few words need to be added to promote the plot and help audiences appreciate and understand the film. Therefore, there was titles card in the early times characterized by modern subtitles which could help people get to know the movie by making use of commas. And in the 1820s, titles card was phased out as the emerging of films with sound. However, different languages improve difficulty of translation, and in this time, dubbing actors are allowed to dub different languages to achieve soundtrack transformation in a way that saves costs, and eventually, subtitling translation with dubbing is produced. Moreover, in order to further control the cost, subtitle translation has become the first choice in most countries, but its development in some western countries is limited. First, it require audiences be able to read. Second, these countries adopt protectionism to their language policies and resist subtitle translation that they see it as a form of language aggression. In the late 1980s, the status of translation was enhanced thanks to the lower technical threshold of audio-visual text production and improvement of the efficiency of network communication. As a result, subtitle translation was favored by more and more people. And subtitling is a special type of language conversion: a condensed written translation of the original spoken language. Subtitling consists of three theoretically separable and practically inseparable layers: inter-lingual information transfer, simplification or condensation of the discourse, and conversion of the spoken language into the written language. The latter two meanings of subtitling distinguish it from other types of translation. Although the reduction of the original text presents in other types of translation, it is never as extensive or as strong as in subtitled translation; whereas in interpretation and translation there is no change in the way the discourse is written and there is no conversion between spoken and written language, subtitled translation undergoes a conversion from spoken to written (or rather, textual) language.

TV culture is a fast and quick- changing culture, and youth are the main group of it. Most of them have learned English in their school, thus, they are more likely to choose easy-understanding, clear and vivid subtitle translation. But it is hard to strike a balance between domestication and foreignization due to time and space limitations and backgrounds differences, so subtitle translation is at an uneven level in many western countries nowadays.

## 3.2. Features

### 3.2.1. Invisibility

Christopher Taylor once said that "good subtitle translation is the kind of translation that seems to be 'invisible' ", which is actually invisible, that is, concise and natural. As far as conciseness is concerned, translators should pay attention to the differences between Chinese and English in subtitle translation. The reason is that Chinese gives priority to parataxis while English prioritizes hypotaxis. In subtitle translation, it is necessary to omit the contents caused by the differences between the two cultures, because they may cause misunderstanding or dyslexia to the audience, and also omit the contents that the audience can infer according to the development of the plot.

### 3.2.2. Direct View

Another feature of subtitling is its direct view. Because non-native audiences are not good at several foreign languages, the only way for them to watch foreign movies depends on subtitle translation. It shows the personality of

characters, scenario of the settings and describes the storyline. All in all, it can give audiences a panoramic and direct view. Usually, subtitling shows a second in the screen, thus, it should get rid of restrain of written languages and replaces them with daily spoken languages in ways that audiences get to know and understand the content of the film. Meanwhile, there are many short sentences in the subtitle translation and the reason is that target audiences are more likely to enjoy and appreciate the whole plot and film. Due to its instantaneity, Europeanized Chinese and Chinglish need to be avoided in the process of translation whether they are English or Chinese movies. Taking E-C subtitle translation as an example, Europeanized Chinese means that grammars and writings are dramatically affected by English languages; as a result, there are many sophisticated and ambiguous words that is not matched with the idiomatic expressions of Chinese, causing misunderstanding and non-readability.

In addition, its direct view also shows in the following two aspects. First, the presence of subtitles basically does not change the graphic and sound (including speech, music and other sound effects) information of the original film. In this way, the subtitle information received by the audience interacts with the original sound information, and what the subtitle cannot express or expresses inadequately, the audience can get compensation from the original sound. For example, the audience can feel the tone of a sentence that is angry or soft through original sound and the image and details of things that the text cannot express. Perhaps this is the superiority of subtitling over other types of translation. Second, the source language is so clear and unmistakable that anyone who knows the source language will unconsciously adopt a critical attitude toward the subtitles. The slightest misstep can cause distrust in the audience and affect the message. The subtitle translator must be as careful and meticulous as if he were producing a bilingual book.

### 3.2.3. Emotional

Subtitles of TV series are usually a replica of a character's verbal expression, reflecting a person's mood, emotion, personality, etc. Accompanied by audio images and the rendering of the plot, subtitles often contain emotions, such as sarcasm, anger, complaint, joy, grief, indifference, affection, kindness, etc. The translation of subtitles must take into account the changes of scenes, characters' characters, the ups and downs of the plot, and other factors. Thus, the translator also needs to put himself into the role to feel the corresponding emotions and feelings, and translate from the perspective of the character, and the translation should reflect the feelings and characteristics of the character, so as to be faithful to the content to be presented in the movie.

### 3.2.4. Cultural Differences

As we all know, there are cultural differences between East and West, so do subtitle translation. As a special communicating activity with multi languages and cultures, subtitle translation of films represents a process that translators take films or movies as a medium, on the basis of original version and focus on target audiences to show different backgrounds and cultures. Therefore, translators need to show respect for each other's cultures, instead of slandering or distorting each other. In this way, audiences have a good chance to learn different customs and knowledge in various activities.

## 4. Skopos Theory and Three Principles

The Skopos Theory is proposed by representatives of German functional theories such as Vermeer and Reiss, who believe that one of the most important factors in determining the purpose of translation is the audience - the recipient of the translated text. And the recipient of subtitle translation is the audience who has their own cultural backgrounds, expectations of translation and communication needs. Every kind of translation refers to a certain audience, so translation is a "discourse produced for a certain purpose and target audience in a target language situation". Vermeer believes that the original text is only a source of partial or total information for the target audience. It can be seen that the status of the original text in the Skopos theory is obviously lower than its status in the equivalence theory. The Skopos theory is free from the shackles of translation studies focused on the original text, and considers translation is a purposeful and consequential act based on the original text, which must be accomplished through negotiation, and translation must follow a series of rules, among which the rule of purpose takes the first place. It means that the translated text depends on the purpose of translation. According to Vermeer, the highest rule in translation should be the "rule of purpose". In other words, the purpose of translation determines the strategy and method of translation. The next two principles are coherence and fidelity. The principle of coherence refers to the fact that the translation must be coherent, that is, the translation must be readable and acceptable in a way that the recipient can understand makes the target text meaningful in communication contexts. The principle of fidelity means that there should be inter-linguistic coherence between the original text and the target text. This is equivalent to what other translation theories call fidelity to the original text, but the degree and form of fidelity to the original text depends on the purpose of the translation and the translator's understanding of the original text.

Thanks to the Functional Translation Theory sees the rule of purpose as the highest principle, and any activity related to translation is an act with purposes, at the same time, the ultimate goal and function of subtitle translation in movie or TV series is to help the audience understand the content and gain their attraction to watch, it is necessary to learn about the Functional Translation Theory, especially the Skopos Theory and its three principles.

## 5. Analysis of E-C Subtitle Translation on Prison Break

### 5.1. Content Description

With the American TV series "Prison Break" is on Renren app, the drama has gained the attention of the majority of fans, and favored by many young people. In addition, those handsome and charming leading actors with wisdom and acting skills, the setting of the storyline, the intricate relationship between the characters and unique scenes have also attracted a large number of Chinese fans, resulting in a "Prison Break" fever.

The first season of *Prison Break* is a mystery TV series directed by Ger Ettanis, written by Paul Schuling and starring Wentworth Miller and other actors. The whole story is about the leading actor Michael Scofield how to help his brother, Lincoln Burrows escape from the prison. And the background is that Lincoln Burrows was falsely accused of assassinating

the president's brother and was sent to prison, where he was to be executed for murder a few months later. However, his little brother Michael Scofield believes he is innocent, so he devised a top secret rescue plan, by robbing a bank to enter his brother's prison - Fox River Prison to implement his escape plan. As an architect with intelligence and wisdom, Michael has tattooed the design of the prison on the body before enter into it, and figured out deeds and relationships of critical person inside the prison. Michael convinced his brother in prison to support his escape plan, and intended to close to the warden and female prison doctor by making full use of his strength and charming so as to gain their trust and successfully carry out a prison break. However, the escape plan was accidentally detected by a few people in the middle of the implementation, and threatened by them; thus, he has been forced to agree to cooperate with Sucre, Bagwell, Franklin, Cooper and several other prisoners to escape from prison. The final result is that Michael led his brother and these several prisoners to escape from prison successfully and began a life of escape.

### 5.2. Analysis of Subtitle Translation

#### 5.2.1. Subtitle Translation Based on the Principle of Purpose

The rule of purpose serves the primary principle in the Skopos theory proposed by German functionalist Vermeer. In the process of English-Chinese subtitle translation, the translator can adjust the dialogue content by deleting, adding, converting and other translation techniques so as to make translation more in line with the expression of the target language while achieving the expected goal of the film to be conveyed to the audience. Here are some examples:

ST: Veronica: You just put the book in that woman's hand.

TT: 维罗妮卡: 你完全放弃了你所有的权利。

Literally, the phrase, "put the book in one's hand", means to put the book in someone's hand, but the translator here translates it as giving up all rights. The reason is that the context of the sentence is in the scene of a court where Michael refused to defend himself and his lawyer said to him. To convey the real meaning of the sentence to the audience, the translator adopts the rule of purpose in a way that makes the target audience understand and avoids ambiguity. Meanwhile, it laid a foundation for the development of later plots.

ST: Belick: You talking out the side of your neck?

TT: 贝里克: 你说话在绕弯子吗?

Actually, "side of one's neck" means "某人脖子旁", but here the translator translates it into "说话绕弯子" in accordance with the word "talking". In this way, audiences can easily understand what does it mean and not be confused about it. If it is translated into "你在颈边讲话", it's likely to make people feel reasonless and strange. So the translator adopts the free translation to simplify the phrase.

ST: Michael: You hook me up with a few weeks' supply?

TT: 迈克尔: 你给我开几个星期的药吧?

Literally, the word "supply" refers to offering something to somebody, but here it refers in particular to "开药". The reason is that it happened in the infirmary of the prison; Michael went there due to diabetes. Therefore, the translator transfers the noun to a verb to explain the real meaning of the word and let it more easy-understanding.

ST: Nick: What do you want us to do? Wave white flag?

TT: 尼克: 你想要我们怎么做? 摇白旗? 还是中场暂停?

Here, Nick, Donovan and Lincoln's son are talking about how to save Lincoln. This moment, Donovan is a little anxious about how to save Lincoln from the prison because their investigation and methods are always disrupted by someone, so she walks back and forth in the room. And Nick feels annoyed and said this sentence. The phrase, "wave white flag" in Chinese means "投降", and all of us know what it means behind the phrase, thus, here the translator chooses literal translation and translates it into "摇白旗", and at the same time, amplification has also been applied in the sentence. In doing so, the target language is more complete and its audiences can get the entire and complete meaning and learn about the urgent situation they are in.

### 5.2.2. Subtitle Translation Based on the Principle of Coherence

In order to achieve the communicative and interactive function with the audience, the subtitle translation must follow the principle of coherence, so that the target audience can understand and accept it, and keeps the plot flowing. At the same time, the translation of subtitles should have actual communicative meaning. Some examples are as followed.

ST: Sucre: No one gets an audience with the Pope.

TT: 苏克雷: 从未有人单独见典狱长。

The translator does not translate directly as "没人见过典狱长", instead points out Sucre's shock at hearing this news through the negative word "从未", and shows a coherent and logical feature, which also invokes the audience's interest in the further plot.

ST: Lincoln: Now's not the time to trust a black inmate.

Michael: Our relationship transcends race.

TT: 林肯: 这时候相信一个黑人狱友可不是什么明智之举。

迈克尔: 我们的关系和种族无关。

The phrase "not the time to do sth" means to "不是做某事的时候", and here to keep fluent and coherent, the translator does not translated it to "不是相信黑人狱友的时候", instead of "相信黑人狱友不是什么明智之举". Obviously, the later version is more likely to match with the idiomatic expression of the target language and full of readability.

ST: Bagwell: You makein' up the rules now, ese?

Sucre: It's my house. You got a problem?

Bagwell: Yeah, I got a problem. We all do.

Sucre: No problem.

TT: 巴格威尔: 这里你说了算?

苏克雷: 这是我房间, 有问题吗?

巴格威尔: 是, 有问题, 我们都有问题。

苏克雷: 不会有问题的。

The word "problem" literally means to "问题" and "难以应付的事". Here, the first "problem" actually refers to Sucre's dissatisfaction with Bagwell because the later breaks his room without an agreement. And the second "problem" refers to "棘手的事情"; the third "problem" means to comfort. However, in order to comply with the principle of coherence and echo the next two "problem", all three "problem" are translated as "问题". In fact, three of them have different meanings. Meanwhile, it helps audiences to feel the pun of the three words.

### 5.2.3. Subtitle Translation Based on the Principle of Fidelity

The principle of fidelity emphasizes that the translation should be faithful to the original text and should not be

changed or created at will. In addition, it should respect the original text but not be translated word by word. Instead, the constraints of the original text need to be gotten over, and at the same time, cultural background and language habits of the target audience need to be taken into account, and then convey the content in a manner of adjustment and words replacement. In other words, it means that the relationship between the source text and the target text. Examples are followed:

ST: Bagwell: Not while I'm so fully invested in your affairs.

TT: 巴格威尔: 现在我跟你算是同一条船上的人了。

According to literal translation, it is translated into "我完全投入到你的事务中了", but it confused the audience because they did not know what kind of affairs they are. In fact, this sentence happens in a bathroom where Michael persuades Bagwell who he does not socialize before, not to bully the child. And Bagwell takes this opportunity to say that he wants to join his prison break team. Thus, the translator translates it to "同一条船上的人" based on the linguistic feature of target language, which not only retains the meaning of the original text but also allows the audience to understand it well, thus achieving the principle of fidelity.

ST: Cooper: Three days inside, and he's already thinking about turning rabbit.

TT: 库珀: 才在牢里呆了三天, 你就想着要大闹天宫了。

The sentence appears in the scene in which Michael invites Cooper to join the escape team, Cooper disdains the words of the new prisoner, thinking that he is just spouting rhetoric, and does not want to participate in it. The phrase "大闹天宫" is from one of the four great Chinese novels, "Journey to the West" and it is aptly translated into the original text here. The version is easier for Chinese audience to understand.

ST: Lincoln: You're willing to risk the entire escape on a guy you don't even know?

Michael: Preparation can only take you so far, after that you gotta take a few leaps of faith.

TT: 林肯: 你愿意把逃亡的成败押在这个你不了解的人身上?

迈克尔: 谋事在人, 成事在天。

If the sentence is translated exactly according to the original text, it will be "准备只能将你带于此, 之后得依靠一些信念驱动". However, the subtitle translation chooses an old saying—"谋事在人, 成事在天" on the basis of domestication strategy. It mainly takes the readability and acceptance into account in a way that Chinese audience gets to know what it wants to express.

ST: Michael: As of right now, there is no "in". Van Gogh over there is my new cellmate.

TT: 现在不再加人了, 那边的那位"梵高"是我的新狱友。

This sentence comes out in the dialogue of Michael and Sucre when they are talking about their "escape team" cannot add more people and Michael's new cellmate—Patoshik. He is a Phd candidate in mathematics, committing to research irregular geometry model; whereas, during the process of the research, he showed symptoms of mental disease and killed his sleeping parents. Then he has been sent to the Fox River jail. Here, the translator maintains the literal translation of "Van Gogh", the reason is that Van Gogh is a well-known artist and painter who also suffered from mental disease, and even those who are not good at English know who he is. Moreover, Patoshik is interested in Michael's tattoos and tries to draw them. As a result, the translator adopts the literal translation and translates it into "梵高" directly. On the one

hand, it maintains the image and flavor of the original text; on the other hand, it complies with the principle of fidelity, and at the same time, target audiences have the opportunity to feel the linguistic charming of the original scene and foreign languages.

## 6. Conclusion

From the perspective of Skopos Theory, this paper takes the E-C subtitle translation of the first season of American TV series *Prison Break* as an example to analyze the subtitle translation of TV series. It has learned that subtitle translation has three characteristics, including invisibility, direct view and cultural differences. Meanwhile, it has made a brief analysis of E-C subtitle translation in *Prison Break* through the three principles followed by Skopos Theory, and concluded that translators should adopt different translation strategies and methods in subtitle translation according to specific contexts. By means of addition, omission, free translation, conversion and word order adjustment, the readability and acceptability of the translation can be enhanced. At the same time, the expected goals of plot exposition, character portrayal and plot development can be achieved effectively, and the target language audience can understand and get to know the film content more clearly and obtain a good movie-watching experience.

Subtitling is an act with a clear purpose, playing a very important role in Chinese and foreign cultural exchanges. Excellent subtitle translation enables audiences to understand the cultural values embedded in the original text in cross-cultural communication and realize deep cultural communication and exchange. And, nowadays, with the booming development of the film and television industry, translators must adopt appropriate methods and strategies to

translate subtitles under the guidance of the three principles. Meanwhile, they need take into account the characteristics of the films and TV series and the needs of different audience groups, so as to enhance the viewing experience of the target language audience and promote cultural exchange between China and the West.

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