

## The Application of Replacement, Interpretation and Reduction Strategies Guided by Skopos Theory in the TV Series *The Empress In The Palace*

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### Abstract

To explain the translation strategies of cultural texts, the researcher examines the subtitle translation strategies of the TV series *The Empress in the Palace* from the perspective of Skopos theory. The main principles of Skopos theory and its applicability to subtitle translation are discussed, and examples of subtitle translation are explored to provide a reference strategy and methodology for the translation of cultural texts.

**Keywords:** Skopos theory, *The Empress in the Palace*, replacement, interpretation, reduction.

### Introduction

Subtitle translation started in the 1930s. Some European scholars found that they could overcome language barriers through translation without losing the originality of the source text. If movies and TV series have contributed greatly to cultural exchange, subtitle translation is like a bridge in this process. Although it is an emerging field, Western scholars have already conducted systematic and logical research in this area. Gambier encouraged his followers to study subtitle translation from different perspectives, such as multisystem theory, psycholinguistics, culture, critical discourse analysis, and functionalism. (Gambier, 2001:183)

*The Empress in Palace* is one such series that is very popular especially among Chinese people. The story introduced the Royal Concubines in the Forbidden City harem who lost their youth and beauty in an endless struggle of love, power, and wealth. The first episode was released in 1st March, 2012. The plot was on March 1st to May 25th, 2012. The Netflix plot was every weekend during the period of March 1st to May 25th by 2012. Number of episodes was 6.

## Literature Review

This paper will present the development of Skopos theory, the basic types and the three principles in the following three areas.

### 1. Development of Skopos Theory

*Skopos theory*, one of the most influential achievements in German Functionalism, was proposed by the famous translation theorist Hans J. Vermeer in 1978. Since *Skopos theory* is not built in a day, its rules and principles are deeply influenced by the Functionalism in Germany. Therefore, it is impossible to introduce *Skopos theory* without any study of other theories in Functionalism.

It is said that the theories proposed by Katharina Reiss, Justa Holz-Manttari and Christine Nord have influenced the introduction and development of *Skopos theory*. The thesis will present a review of their studies in the following section.

Katharina Reiss (1923- ), graduate from Heidelberg University, is one of the founders in German Functionalism. She is an expert in translation teaching and criticism. As early as 1971 she expressed her functional viewpoints of translation in her work *Objective Approach to Translation Criticism*. In the same year, her well-known book *Possibilities and Limits of Translation Criticism* was published which was regarded as “the starting point for scholarly analysis of translation in Germany” (Nord, 2001:9).

As a functionalist, Reiss proposes some concepts supporting her Functionalism view. She uses “Integral Communication Performance” to describe the ideal translation, “in which the aim in the TL (target language) is equivalence as regards the conceptual content, linguistic form and communicative function of a SL text” (Nord,2001:9). As a theorist and experienced translator, she recognizes that a complete equivalence is impossible in translation practice. Guided by the “Translation Brief” of Functionalism, she discusses two phenomena which have different functions with the originals. On one hand, the function of the target text is quite different from its original. Take an adaptation of a prose text for the stage as example. On the other hand, the addressees from target text are in different age or educated level. For instance, the translation of *Gulliver’s Travels* for children should be quite different from the original. Because translators need to rewrite the story and ensure it should be understood by most of the children.

One of the biggest achievements of Reiss’ is text typology, which is on the basis of the “organon model” of language function. “According to Reiss, text typologies help the translator specify the appropriate hierarchy of equivalence levels needed for a particular translation Skopos” (Nord, 2001:37). There are three text types in this theory, which are

informative text, expressive text and operative text. Informative text aims at “informing the reader about objects and phenomena in the real world” (Nord, 2001:37). And purely phatic communication is a special kind of informative text, for “the actual informative value is zero and the message is the communication process itself” (Ibid, 2001:37). When it comes to the expressive text, it requires the translator to keep the same style with the original, for it can produce an aesthetic effect on the readers. However, in operative text, content and form are subordinated to the extralinguistic effect. The same reaction in the audience is the guidance of operative text though it may involve changing content and stylistic features of the original.

Although Reiss’s study is the foundation of *Skopos theory*, most of her translating theory is based on the equivalence. It is found that she excludes cultural elements when explaining her theories.

Justa Holz-Manttari (1936- ) is a Finnish translator and scholar. She puts forward the Theory of Translational Action and the concept “Message Transmitters”. Theory of Translational Action is introduced in her book *Translatorisches Handeln: Theorie and Methode (Translational Action: Theory and Method)*, which develops from the Action Theory proposed by Wright in 1968. In Holz-Manttari’s view, translation is “a complex action designed to achieve a particular purpose” (Holz-Manttari & Vermeer, 1985:4). In other words, she regards translation as an action with strong intention. The Theory of Action analyzes translation from a linguistic point of view. It focuses on the purpose of translation, which emphasizes TT should keep the same function with ST rather than a complete equivalence.

When it comes to “Message Transmitter”, it not only consists of textual materials, but also contains the pictures, sounds and body movements. Holz-Manttari prefers to use “Message Transmitter” to describe the process of translation, for translation is a process both including linguistic symbols and non-linguistic symbols.

Holz-Manttari also has analyzed the roles of the participants in translation. They are initiator, translator, user, and message receiver. Furthermore, the situational condition (time, place, medium) never should be neglected in translation.

Christine Nord (1943- ), a student of Reiss’s is one of the representatives of Functionalism. It is Nord who firstly collects and analyzes previous Functionalism works and answers some doubts and questions raised by different scholars around the world during the development of this school.

After studying Vermeer's *Skopos theory*, she has found some limitations of it. She adds Loyalty Principle to improve and enrich the theoretical framework of *Skopos theory*. Strictly speaking, modern *Skopos theory* is consisted of two rules and a principle, which are Skopos Rule, Coherence Rule and Loyalty Principle. Apart from Loyalty Principle, Christine Nord (1989) divides translation into two categories — Documentary Translation and Instrumental Translation. These two translation types are based on Vermeer's translation type and House's Covert and Overt Translation. The Documentary Translation is "a kind of document of (certain aspects of) a communicative interaction in which a source-culture sender communicates with a source-culture audience via the source text under source-culture conditions" (Nord, 1997c). And the Instrumental Translation refers to "producing in the target language an instrument for a new communicative interaction between the source-culture sender and a target-culture audience, using (certain aspects of) the source text as a model" (Ibid, 1997c).

To be specific, there are four subcategories under Documentary Translation. Firstly, word-for-word or interlinear translation focuses on the morphological, lexical or syntactic features of ST. Secondly, literal or grammar translation means that the translation adapts the syntactic structure and idiomatic use of vocabulary for reproducing the words of the original. Thirdly, philological or learned translation refers to a literal translation with necessary explanations about the source text or source cultural elements. Lastly, foreignizing translation aims at preserving the exotic expressions of ST. Such translation "may create strangeness or cultural distance for the target audience" (Nord, 2001:50). And Instrumental Translation divides into three subtypes regarding the function. Equifunction Translation uses to describe the TT and ST in the same function. However, when the TT and ST are in different function, we called it "Heterofunctional Translation". And the Homologous Translation devotes to preserve the same status with ST.

Documental Translation and Instrumental Translation are just two types of translation Nord divided. She doesn't provide any preference of them. In the practical translation, the text type of ST plays an important role on determining which translation Skopos should be selected.

## **2. Concepts of *Skopos Theory***

In order to avoid a conceptual confusion, it is necessary to explain some basic concepts before the introduction to the three main rules of *Skopos theory*.

It can't be denied that previous theories make a contribution to the development of *Skopos theory*. Among them, Theory of Action is regarded to be the foundation of *Skopos*

*theory*. According to Theory of Action, translation is an intentional action. The representatives of this theory believe that “translational action may involve giving advice and perhaps even warning against communicating in the intended way” (Nord, 2001:17). The translator plays a role as “culture consultant” in this action.

Skopos, Aim, Purpose, Intention, Function and Translation Brief play a key role on the development of *Skopos theory*. Skopos is a Greek word for purpose. And it is viewed as the prime principle to determine which translation strategy will be applied in the translation. As translation is an intentional action, Vermeer thinks that “genuine reasons for actions can always be formulated in terms of aims or statements of goals” (Nord, 2001:27). In other words, Aim is a final result which is related to action. Although Skopos is a Greek word for purpose, Purpose is different from Skopos here. It is defined as “a provisional stage in the process of attaining an aim” (Ibid, 2001:28). And the Function discussed here refers to “what a text means or is intended to mean from the receiver’s point of view” (Ibid, 2001:28). But when it comes to the definition of Intention, it is viewed as an aim-oriented plan of action which points toward an appropriate way of producing or understanding the text from a view of sender. Although Vermeer doesn’t draw a distinction among these concepts, as a general rule, he subsumes them under the generic concept of Skopos. Since the Translation Brief is not proposed by Vermeer, he has used other item says Commission to describe the same thing as Translation Brief does. The Translation Brief is decided by the translation Skopos which specifies what kind of translation is needed.

As a student of Reiss’s, Vermeer and his teacher discuss Adequacy and Equivalence in a textual level. Katharina Reiss (1983) explains Adequacy as follow: “Adequacy refers to the qualities of a target text with regard to the translation brief: the translation should be ‘adequate to’ the requirements of the brief. It is a dynamic concept related to the process of translational action and referring to the ‘goal-oriented selection of signs that are considered appropriate for the communicative purpose defined in the translation assignment.” (Nord, 2001: 35).

As translators are members of the ST readers, they will get the original information and understand the ST in their own way. After digesting the ST, they proceed to inform it to the target addressees in a target-culture situation. However, target text addressees and source text addressees are from different culture and language community. Therefore, it is impossible for translator to provide the same amount and same kind of information as the original producer does. But translators can try their best preserve the same goal with the original. This is what Adequacy requires to do.

However, “Equivalence, on the other hand, is a static, result-oriented concept describing a relationship of ‘equal communicative value’ between two text or, on lower ranks, between words, phrases, sentences, syntactic structures and so on” (Nord, 2001:36). According to the definition, it can be found that Equivalence only occurs on the lexical and syntactic level. Such translating standard may be possible aim sometimes, but it shouldn’t regard as a translation principle valid all the time. The main difference between Adequacy and Equivalence is that Adequacy pursues a textual equivalence which is equal to “functional equivalence”. And “Functional Equivalence” is a goal pursued by functionalists in their theories. But Equivalence aims at lexical and syntactic equivalence.

### **3. Three Rules of *Skopos Theory***

The core of *Skopos theory* is contained three rules, which are Skopos Rule, Coherence Rule and Fidelity Rule. An analysis of each rule will be provided as follows.

#### **3.1 Skopos Rule**

According to *Skopos theory*, Skopos Rule is the top-ranking rule for any translation. Specifically, the translation action is determined by its purposes, that is, “the end justifies the means” (Nord, 2001:29). And Hans J. Vermeer declares that “Skopos is variable of the receiver” (Ibid, 2001:29). In other words, the receiver or addressee in target culture is a determining factor for selecting a proper translation strategy. For the concept of Skopos Rule, Vermeer has explained it as follows: “Each text is produced for a given purpose and should serve this purpose. The Skopos rule thus reads as follows: translate/interpret/speak/write in a way that enables your text/translation to function in the situation in which it is used and with the people who want to use it and precisely in the way they want it to function” (Nord, 2001:29).

From the above explanation of Skopos Rule, it is clear to see that a concrete purpose of translation can obtain a functional equivalence between ST and TT. Skopos instructs what must translate consciously and consistently. This is why Skopos Rule is put on the first place in *Skopos theory*.

#### **3.2 Coherence Rule**

Hans J. Vermeer says that “text is just an offer of information” (Nord, 2001:31). According to this concept, TT is also an offer of information which is formulated by the translators in a target culture. As receiver or addressee is a determining factor in translation, a

qualified TT should be understood and accepted by the people from target culture. Therefore, Coherence Rule is put on the second important place in *Skopos theory*.

In a narrow sense, Coherence Rule is equivalent to intratextual coherence. It means that TT should make sure to be understood. The receiver or addressee should get used to the words and syntactic structures in TT.

### 3.3 Fidelity Rule

Fidelity rule is also called intertextual coherence in *Skopos theory*. Since a translation is “an offer of information”, “it is expected to bear some kind of relationship with the corresponding source text” (Nord, 2001:32). It not only requires to faithful to the ST in a semantic level but also remains the same style and flavor as the ST. Fidelity can be fully reached only a translation becomes an imitation of the original work. As a maximal fidelity is hard to obtain, Vermeer believes that it is a form only be expected in literary translation. It might be said that the postulate of ‘fidelity’ to the source text requires that e.g. a news item should be translated ‘as it was in the original’. But this is a goal in itself. Indeed, it is by definition probably the goal that most literary translators traditionally set themselves (Nord, 2001:32).

In the light of *Skopo theory*, intertextual coherence is subordinated to intratextual coherence. Since the Skopos requires the function of TT is different from that in ST, the translation standard will no longer be intertextual coherence but functional equivalence on the basis of Skopos. If the Skopos Rule determines the means of translation, the Coherence Rule requires the quality of TT.

### Translation Strategies in *The Empress in the Palace*

Since the mid-twentieth century, the main issues discussed in the translation discipline have revolved around the strategies of domestication and foreignisation.

Domestication means that the translator follows the cultural values of the target language and presents the text in the language of the target country to the maximum extent possible; that is, the translation is made in the language of the target reader, sometimes even rewriting the original.

In contrast, the strategy of foreignisation means that the translator follows the cultural values of the source language when translating the text, preserving some of the exotic elements of the source text through an unfamiliar style of translation.

The American version of the *Empress in the Palace* contains many Chinese idioms, famous personalities and other words and sentences that are very much a part of Chinese language and culture. If an appropriate translation is not chosen in a way that is understandable to the reader, ambiguities may arise, and the translation may become obscure. In addition, due to the constraints of screen space and the speed of the characters' speech, film subtitles need to be concise and semantically clear to convey the content of the film in the shortest possible time. Therefore, from both perspectives, the domestication strategy is the ideal translation strategy for the subtitles of the *Empress in the Palace* and is able to convey the meaning of the Chinese language in a way that is easily understood by American audiences, thus promoting the country's culture and generating box office sales. Under the domestication strategy, the subtitle translation of the American version of the *Empress in the Palace* uses three specific translation strategies: reduction, interpretation, and replacement.

### 1. Reduction

The series adopted a reduction strategy for the posthumous title of Emperor YONG ZHENG. The translator translated the long posthumous title of "敬天昌运建中表正文武英明宽仁信毅眷圣大孝至诚宪皇帝之墓" into "In memory of the YONG ZHENG Emperor." A reduction strategy can be adopted if the source text is too long and repetitive.

### 2. Interpretation

For example, parts of the subtitles in *The Empress in The Palace* have well-known meanings in Chinese. For example, in the subtitle translation of *the Empress in the Palace*, "鸡犬升天" (The chicken and the dog followed her to heaven means if one person is successful, the people associated with her are also successful) was interpreted as "rise up through her success" because the intention of "chicken and dog" in the source text had different meanings in English. Foreign audiences do not understand the origin and background of this idiom well, so the subtitle translation explains the meaning of "鸡犬升天" by using the word "success." The word "明珠暗投" (Bright pearls appeared in the gloom, it means regretting one's fate) is interpreted as "will not be granted an ordinary life," which does not stick to the formal characteristics of the source "pearl" (明珠) and accurately conveys the reference in the current context. The interpretation of "绣花枕头" (Embroidered pillow, it describes a person as useless) as "Her beauty is vain and useless" avoids the audience's understanding of obstacles caused by unfamiliar images of the source text. The interpretive translation strategy avoids the obscure figurative language of the source Chinese text, finds out the cultural connotation to be conveyed indirectly through the text form, and avoids the reading pressure caused by the subtitle annotation.

### 3. Replacement

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In *the Empress in the Palace*, there are six instances of replacement translation strategies were found in the research. Replacement translation strategies are used to translate Chinese idioms. For example, "Kill a chicken in front of a monkey" (杀鸡儆猴) is replaced by the relationship between "dog and lion." "Lips and teeth depend on each other" (唇齿相依) is replaced by the relationship between "hand and glove." "The tree fell, and the monkeys in it ran away" (树倒猢猻散) is replaced by the relationship between "a rat and a sinking ship." At the same time, in the metaphorical vocabulary, "river and mountain" is replaced by the throne. The replacement translation strategy in the subtitle translation of film and television series can shorten the translation length as much as possible. It can convey the plot in a way that the audience expects and is familiar with (Hong, 1999).

The following are some of the subtitles represented by the various translation strategies:

Chinese subtitles	English subtitles	Translation Strategies
老天爷 (Generally refers to many gods in ancient Chinese mythology)	The God	replacement
乌纱帽 (Black hat worn by official)	Post	replacement
白玉蹄花 (White Jade with ribs)	Pork ribs stewed with tofu	replacement
脑袋 (head)	life	replacement
栗子糕 (Chestnut snacks)	Chestnut Pudding	replacement
吾皇万岁万岁万万岁 (Our emperor can live for 10,000 years)	Long live the Emperor	replacement
膝下福薄 (No blessing under the knee)	There are no children	replacement
一片冰心在玉壶 (A piece of ice heart in a jade pot)	There is a pure heart in my jade jar with no flaws.	replacement
奉天承运皇帝诏曰 (According to the will of heaven, the emperor issued an order)	The Emperor's order	reduction

以色侍人，能得几时好？ (Do you get a lot of benefits from serving people with your beauty?)	Beauty doesn't get you permanent love.	reduction
一入宫门深似海 (Once you enter the palace, it's as deep as the sea)	It's hard to survive in the palace.	reduction
福如东海，寿比南山 (Good fortune is like the East Sea, longevity is like the South Mountain.)	I wish you happiness and long life.	reduction
朝廷	The court	Interpretation
上书房	Upper Study Room	Interpretation
满汉通婚	Manchurian-Chinese intermarriage	Interpretation
翻牌子 (Flip the card)	The Emperor chooses a concubine to serve.	Interpretation
秀女 (The girl waiting to be chosen as the Emperor's consort.)	Candidates	Interpretation
会咬人的狗不叫	A dog that bites does not bark.	Interpretation
独善其身 (Do your part and don't get involved in other people's business.)	keep to oneself	Interpretation
不识抬举 (not know how to behave)	Unappreciative	Interpretation
谢主隆恩 (Thank you my master for giving me such a great favour)	Thank you, Your Majesty, for your kindness	Interpretation
相敬如宾 (The couple treat each other as they would treat a guest.)	treat each other as a guest	Interpretation
兵部	Ministry of Military Affairs	Interpretation
吏部	Ministry of Appointments	Interpretation
礼部	Ministry of Rites	Interpretation

户部	Ministry of Revenue	Interpretation
尚书	government minister	Interpretation
太医	Imperial Doctor	Interpretation
韬光养晦 (hiding one's light under a bush)	To conceal one's strengths and bide one's time	Interpretation
奇货可居 (object for profiteering)	rare commodity	Interpretation
皇上明察	The emperor is aware of what is going on.	Interpretation
生辰八字 (one's birth data for astrological purposes)	Date of Birth	Interpretation
登基 (Enthronement)	Ascend the throne	Interpretation
泛泛之辈 (Ordinary people with no talent)	A nonentity	Interpretation

## Conclusion

Based on the Skopos theory, the subtitle translation strategies in the American version of the Empress in the Empress are explored. The show is translated using naturalisation strategies, in addition to specific translation strategies such as reduction, interpretation and replacement, which make the subtitles more accessible to American audiences, thus achieving the goal of promoting the country's culture and earning box office revenues. The study of the subtitle translation strategies in the American version of the Empress in the Palace can provide an effective translation methodology for the translation of other cultural texts in China and promote the exchange and dissemination of Chinese culture. Although there are some questionable aspects in the subtitle translation of the whole series, it is generally successful and conveys the content of the film. Inevitably, the clash of cultures can cause difficulties in understanding. Therefore, translators should analyse the purpose of their translations in the process of translating cultural texts and choose different translation strategies flexibly based on Skopos theory, so as to make the translations of higher quality and promote the exchange and dissemination of different cultures.

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