

# Subtitling of Humour in *Black Books* from English to Chinese in the Perspective of Skopos Theory

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## Abstract

Sitcoms originated in the early twentieth century in America and are popular for their hilarious dialogues and plots. As sitcoms are closely linked to the native culture, it is hard to translate them into another language without losing the grip of punchlines. This article analyses the British Sitcom *Black Books* from the perspective of Skopos Theory, exploring the strategies of subtitling humor from English to Chinese in order to introduce high-quality audiovisual programmes to Chinese audiences and promote the development of subtitle translation. Based on the three-stage methodological phases of Skopos Theory- purposefulness, coherence, and fidelity, this research systematically examines translation challenges regarding puns, cultural-loaded terms, irony, and the final delivery to the audience, aiming to propose targeted solutions. Skopos-theory-informed strategies balance semantic accuracy with preserving humor, offering theoretical instruction and practical insights for cross-cultural comedy translation.

**Keywords:** Skopos Theory, subtitle translation, humour, *Black Books*

## 1. Introduction

As cultural globalization intensifies, many countries have been actively promoting their culture on the global stage to strengthen their cultural soft power. Audiovisual works have become one of the most important bridges in cross-cultural communication with their unique multi-sensory allure. For certain countries like America, Hollywood movies have already become an iconic cultural symbol. High-standard subtitling is particularly crucial as Chinese audiences increasingly seek entertaining and high-quality foreign programs.

Current research on subtitling has achieved progress in theoretical applications, multidisciplinary convergence, and genre-specific translation. Numerous scholars have adopted various translation strategies into subtitling from theoretical frameworks such as Eco-Translatology, Relevance Theory, and Functional Equivalence Theory. However, the existing strategies for conveying humor in sitcoms remain overly general, resulting in inadequate comedic effects delivery on the screen. Considering research inadequacies and realistic requirements, this article applies the Skopos Theory and focuses on the critical barrier

in subtitling sitcoms—humor delivery using *Black Books* as a case study.

As a classical British absurdist sitcom known for its dry humor, *Black Books* has captivated viewers with rave reviews since its premiere in 2000. However, the current subtitled version of Bilibili still overlooks cultural metaphors and pragmatic logic, which will heavily compromise viewers' understanding of the punchlines. Given that most of the punchlines are rooted in cultural context, it is important to convey the humor into another language considering cultural and linguistic differences. This thesis focuses on cultural uniqueness in cultural-loaded words, polysemy in puns and context-dependent irony. Hopefully, practical translation strategies can be concluded under the instruction of Skopos Theory and contribute to sitcom subtitling practice in the future.

This article will start by reflecting on existing research achievements including subtitling, Skopos Theory, and humor translation, and then investigate the British dry humor and analyze the cases in *Black Books*. Guided by the principles of Skopos Theory, this study prioritizes audience reception, employing a balanced approach of "literal translation" and "free translation" to derive contextually optimal solutions, thereby providing new approaches to audiovisual translation practice.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Skopos Theory

The Skopos Theory (*Skopostheorie*) was first proposed by German scholar Hans J. Vermeer in 1978. He advocated that the purpose of translation should serve as the primary guideline for translators' decisions. However, this concept initially failed to gain significant attention due to social factors. It was not until 1984 when Katharina Reiß and Hans J. Vermeer co-authored *Towards a General Theory of Translational Action* that the theory received professional recognition. In the first section of this work, Vermeer elaborated extensively on Skopos Theory, liberating translation studies from the constraints of source-text-centric approaches and redefining translation as a purpose-driven, outcome-oriented activity based on source texts. However, as translation studies in Germany up to that point had been entirely dominated by linguistic theories based on the fundamental notion of equivalence, this paradigm shift attracted harsh criticism, who

argued that it compromised the limits of "translation proper" (Koller, 1995, p. 193).

The Skopos Theory gained broader international recognition after Nord translated the work into English (2014), allowing it to transcend the German-speaking world. The theory has been extensively applied to literary translation practices, such as the African Bible Translation (Esala, 2016) and commercial Advertisement Translation (Cui, 2009). In recent years, with the surging viewership of streaming platforms and growing public demand for foreign content, the application of Skopos Theory to subtitle translation has emerged as a prominent research trend in China, evidenced by its implementation in Chinese translations of *Pirates of the Caribbean* (Li, 2014) and *The Matrix* (Zhang, 2013).

Vermeer (1984, p. 90) posited that translation processes guided by Skopos Theory incorporate the sociological principle, prioritizing the target audience's needs and expectations as the defining purpose of translational action. Nord (2001, p. 27-28) further categorized translation purposes into three dimensions: 1) the general purpose aimed at by the translator in the translation process (perhaps to earn a living); 2) the communicative purpose aimed at by the target text in the target situation (perhaps to instruct the reader); and 3) the purpose aimed at by a particular translation strategy or procedure (for example, to translate literally in order to show the structural particularities of the source language). Building on Nord's framework, Yin Xiaofei (2024, p. 130) concluded that Skopos Theory demonstrates strong communicative orientation and social functionality, serving as a vital framework for specific societal groups. Given this inherent communicative nature, Skopos Theory particularly applies to subtitle translation. Translators can employ audience profiling for different film genres to achieve precision in conveying emotional content and cultural messages, thereby enhancing viewers' comprehension of imported films. Notably, subtitles should adapt translation strategies according to diverse target audiences (Mazur, 2023, p. 511). The application of Skopos Theory in subtitle translation has now become a consensus.

### 2.2 Current Challenges in Subtitle Translation

In 1990, Dirk Delabastita distinguished dubbing translation as an audio-level practice aimed at replacing the source text by removing the

original soundtrack during film adaptation. In contrast, subtitle translation operates as a literal, visual layer superimposed onto the original audiovisual text. Chinese scholar Zheng Xiqing (2020, p. 110) argued that this added textual layer inevitably interacts with the film's visual and auditory elements, creating a tripartite dynamic constrained by both the interplay of these components and the sociocultural context of recipients. Furthermore, culturally specific slang, colloquialisms, catchphrases, and enigmatic folk sayings pose significant challenges to dialogue translation. As linguistic carriers of culture, these condensed expressions encapsulate unique ethnic identities yet resist easy comprehension by foreign audiences. Restricted by temporal and spatial limitations inherent to subtitling, translators cannot freely add annotations. This leads to dual issues: inadequate transmission of cultural nuances and reduced accessibility for target viewers, ultimately resulting in a cultural discount (Zhang, 2021, p. 42).

Wang Juan (2020, p. 90) examines the problem from a cognitive perspective, addressing challenges at both the production end (translators' cognitive processing) and reception end (audiences' cognitive processing). She emphasizes that more than other translation forms, subtitling requires prioritizing audience experience through controlled subtitle length, reduced information redundancy, and linguistically tailored decisions. At a deeper level, translators must align source subtitles with viewers' psychological engagement to ensure coherence with on-screen visuals, thereby enhancing cinematic immersion and audience acceptance of translated content (Yin, 2024, p. 131). In essence, the defining feature of subtitle translation lies in its imperative to prioritize audience receptivity as the paramount translational objective.

### 2.3 Humor Translation in Overseas Sitcoms

The translation of humor in sitcoms has long been a focal point in their cross-cultural dissemination. During the early stages of globalization, literal translation dominated this practice. For instance, the Chinese-dubbed version of *Everybody Loves Raymond* received a lukewarm reception domestically, sparking criticism about the cultural incompatibility of American humor (Qiu, 2005). Chinese television scholar Miao Di (2004, p. 98) observed: "American TV sitcoms often struggle to gain

traction in non-English-speaking countries or even English-speaking regions outside the U.S. as humor rooted in localized cultural contexts frequently loses its appeal through translation."

International scholar Daniela M. (1999, p. 180) analyzed the mechanisms behind sitcom humor, concluding that humor arises from subverting audience expectations and results from interwoven of linguistic, audiovisual, and other elements. Its translatability hinges on translators' mastery of cultural, linguistic, and technical dimensions. Expanding on this, Dong Haiya (2010, p. 78) emphasized that the cultural acclimatization of foreign humor depends not solely on translation quality but is inevitably constrained by multifaceted factors. Sitcom humor derived from creative manipulations of linguistic elements (phonetics, script, lexicon, syntax), popular culture references, sociocultural norms, paralinguistic features (intonation, tone), and canned laughter.

While literature on subtitling and Skopos Theory have proliferated both domestically and abroad, and persistent translation challenges have caught the attention of scholars, proposed solutions for reproducing humorous effects of western sitcoms remain unsatisfying. Also, there exists a paucity of research on the subtitling of the British sitcom *Black Books* in China, leaving imperfect subtitling versions in official domestic platforms. Given the drama's notable frequency of humor, it is an ideal subject for research from the perspective of Skopos and offers valuable insights for translating foreign sitcoms into Chinese.

### 3. Analysis

Vermeer (1984, pp. 91-92) proposed three-stage methodological phases for translation decision-making in *Towards a General Theory of Translational Action*. The first phase involves assessing the target audience, including their nationality, gender, profession, age, and cultural background, through research into their linguistic and sociocultural context to inform translation strategies. The second phase entails redefining the relationship between the source text and the target text, determining the permissible scope for creative adaptation and the direction of modification. The third phase requires predicting the audience's reception and reactions to the translated text for further adjustments. The first two phases demand the translator's understanding of the audience's

cultural background, while the final phase necessitates additional competencies beyond linguistic proficiency, such as familiarity with the target culture's humor mechanisms in contexts like sitcom translation. This chapter will apply Vermeer's model to analyze specific subtitling cases from *Black Books*. The cases are classified into three categories according to their sources of humor. As the Bilibili version does not provide satisfying humor delivery, this chapter tries to revise the subtitle for better humorous effects, and to summarize strategies for sitcom subtitle translation under the instruction of Vermeer's model.

### 3.1 Cultural-Loaded Words

Cultural-loaded words are words or phrases imbued with unique meanings and symbolic significance within a specific cultural context. They carry cultural memories, emotions, and values, reflecting the lifestyles, beliefs, and traditions of particular social groups. As humor carried by cultural-loaded words deeply root in its native culture, the successful conversion of cultural elements is crucial in comedy translation. Cultural-loaded terms form a key component of *Black Books'* distinctive dry humor, yet the current subtitles are confusing for audience unfamiliar of British culture:

#### Example 1 (Season 1, Episode 4)

Fran: I want Manny on this. Manny!

我得让曼尼来听听，曼尼！

Bernard: No, no, no, he's no good to anybody.

不不不，不行，他来了对谁都没好处

Bernard: He stayed up all night with his birthday present.

他一晚上都在摆弄他的生日礼物。

Bernard: The complete set of "*The Sweeney*" and an espresso machine.

一整套除暴安良和一台咖啡机。

This dialogue occurs when Fran seeks Manny at the bookstore but is stopped by Bernard. "*The Sweeney*" refers to a 1970s British crime drama series known for action-packed scenes, explaining Manny's hyperactive behavior later in the episode as he mimics police characters. The original subtitles use a literal translation ("除暴安良"), but Chinese audiences, unfamiliar with this British series, may be confused by Manny's antics in the following plot. The semantic vacancy of the culture-loaded word violates Vermeer's first phase (audience

assessment), and the humorous effect is also omitted. A better approach would be adding a brief on-screen note, such as "*The Sweeney* 是英国 70 年代的一部警匪片，讲述两名警察联手破案，追捕劫匪的故事" to ensure viewers grasp the subsequent plot.

#### Example 2 (Season 2, Episode 2)

Landlord: You're both such lovely girls.

两位可爱的女士们

Landlord: You'll be sharing the sugar in no time.

你们很快就可以分享糖果了

Landlord: Don't fight, and if you do

不要打架 如果非要打的话

Landlord: fight nice with pillows and... jimjams.

用枕头和睡衣打

In this context, the sleazy landlord installs a movable wall in Fran's room to rent space to another girl. "Jimjams" (a British slang for pajamas) alludes to pillow fights at sleepovers, often portrayed as flirtatious in Western media. The landlord's perverse imagination envisions the girls in suggestive attire, but the literal translation ("睡衣") lacks this subtext, and the audience cannot get the humor and may be bothered by the canned laughter in the background. In this case, the literal translation violates Vermeer's third phase (audience reception prediction). An adapted translation, such as using a localized term like "小裙裙" (a playful Chinese term for feminine clothing), would better convey the innuendo.

### 3.2 Puns

A pun is a rhetorical device that exploits polysemy or homophony to create dual meanings within a statement, allowing both a literal and implied interpretation to coexist. Translating puns poses significant challenges due to linguistic disparities between languages, especially between English and Chinese, which differ in writing systems and phonetic structures. In sitcoms, puns often elicit laughter or admiration for their clever design. In *Black Books*, for instance:

#### Example 3 (Season 1, Episode 4)

Police: I'll let you take over, offer him a deal.

等下就全权交给你了，跟他做个交易

Manny: What sort of deal?

什么样的交易

Police: I don't know, you call it.



我也不知道 你自己决定吧

Police: But don't give away too much.

但也别太便宜他了

Police: He's looking at two years, minimum.

他至少要坐两年牢

Police: I'll be back in ten.

我要离开

Manny: Huh? !

啊

Police: Ten minutes.

十分钟

Here, Manny misinterprets "ten" as referring to a ten-year prison sentence (linking it to "two years" mentioned earlier), leading to his shocked reaction. The original subtitles merely state the officer's departure, missing the pun's humor. Guided by Vermeer's Skopos Theory, the translation should prioritize recreating the comic effect. For example, rewriting the line as follows.

Police: He's looking at two years, minimum.

他至少得进去两年

Police: I'll be back in ten.

我一会也得进去

Manny: Huh? !

啊

Thus, it could preserve the joke by creating a misunderstanding between "entering" a prison cell and entering the interrogation room, aligning with the audience's expectation of laughter.

Example 4 (Season 1, Episode 5)

Fran: Um, how...how are you?

你 你怎么样

Howell: Oh I'm great, you know.

不错

Howell: Still beavering away on Radio 4.

还在第四电台努力工作

Howell: Yeah.

对

Howell: Hey, you look Fran-tastic.

你看起来很不错啊

The pun "Fran-tastic" (combining Fran's name and "fantastic") relies on phonetic play, but the literal translation ("很不错") loses the humor,

which diminished the intelligence of the character. A target-oriented approach would use a Chinese homophonic substitution, such as "你看起来生活很幸'弗'啊" (incorporating "弗" from Fran's name and the word "幸福", which means happiness in Chinese), to retain the wordplay and witty intent.

### 3.3 Irony

Irony involves using language to convey the opposite of its literal meaning, often expressing criticism or mockery through indirectness. British comedies frequently employ sarcastic irony for dry humor, exemplified by Bernard's acerbic remarks in *Black Books*:

Example 5 (Season 2, Episode 2)

Fran: OK. If I told you that the walls of my flat

嗨 如果我说我房间的墙

Fran: were actually moving in, would you think that I was strange?

真的会动 你们会不会觉得离谱

Bernard: No, I'd ask you to come round and look after my small children.

不会 我会请你来照看孩子

Bernard's sarcastic reply mocks Fran's claim by comparing her absurd situation to the absurdity of him having children to care for. The original subtitles ("照看孩子") flatten the irony, because caring for children seems not as abnormal as movable walls. Following Vermeer's third stage (audience reception), amplification is needed to visualize Bernard's attitude of suspect: translating it as "要是墙会动 那我家孩子就会满地跑了" preserves the character's caustic tone and the scene's dark humor.

## 4. Conclusion

Through an analysis of the subtitles in *Black Books*, it can be concluded that the most significant barrier for audience from understanding the humor is caused by the current official translation, which adopts literal translation approaches, neglecting cultural metaphors and lack of in-depth research into characters' personalities before translation. This oversight has diminished the series' distinctive deadpan humor — a hallmark of British comedy where characters deliver jokes with straight-faced seriousness. The three core characters generate humor through fixed patterns: Bernard's acerbic sarcasm towards Manny, followed by retaliatory remarks from Manny and Fran against Bernard's venomous

comments. Their linguistic commonality manifests British-style cold humor through culturally loaded references, clever puns, and precise irony.

The translation challenges primarily stem from three aspects: 1) Culturally-specific terms familiar to Western audiences remain obscure to Chinese viewers; 2) Semantic/Phonetic wordplay resists direct conversion between languages; 3) Satirical nuances demand cultural contextualization. Rather than forced localization, preserving the heterogeneous cultural elements of British comedy proves more effective, requiring translators to first thoroughly comprehend UK sitcom conventions.

Under the instruction of Skopos theory, proposed translation strategies include:

- 1) Contextual re-translation ensuring logical coherence
- 2) Substitution with Chinese-equivalent puns when applicable
- 3) Top-screen annotations for culture-specific terms crucial to plot comprehension
- 4) Judicious incorporation of localized analogies

These approaches aim to maximize retention of original comedic elements, enabling Chinese audiences to appreciate English humor while facilitating cross-cultural dissemination of quality comedy works.

However, this study has limitations. The research focuses on a classic British dry humor series, which may not be universally applicable to other sitcom genres. Nevertheless, it is hoped that this study's theoretical observations can inform future translation practices, ensuring that English-language sitcoms retain their inherent humorous qualities in target languages. This approach would better satisfy audiences' entertainment and leisure needs while preserving the cultural essence of the original works.

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