

# ***On the Subtitle Translation of Musical Lyrics from the Perspective of Domestication and Foreignization: A Case Study of Classic Musical Theatre Cats***

**Xiaoyu Zhang<sup>1,a,\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*School of Translation, Qufu Normal University, Rizhao City, Shandong Province, 276800, China*  
*a. ELVIRAZXY@qfnu.edu.cn*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** With various art gradually spreading all over the world, excellent musicals bearing the multicultural features have also entered into the public life. Translation as an important tool in transcultural communication, is indispensable in the expression and spreading of such art. For musicals that are played on the screen, given the unique features of the genre and the rules of subtitling, the translation of musicals requires delicate processing and special effort. This paper discussed the importance of musical translation and subtitle translation in the people's modern life. With the focus on the translation of the cultural elements in the musical, this paper discovered the application of translation strategies: Domestication and Foreignization Strategies in the subtitle translation of *Cats*. Through comparing and analysis, the study at present discussed the effect of the strategies on the translation and provided suggestions on the choice of Domestication and Foreignization Strategies in the subtitle translation of musicals.

**Keywords:** musical translation, subtitle translation, domestication and foreignization, musical *Cats*

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. The Importance of Musical Subtitle Translation**

At the background of globalization, cultural transmission channels are also more diverse. The government's discourse on cultural exchange and mutual learning makes cross-cultural communication necessary. With the satisfaction of material life needs, people nowadays are paying more attention to the pursuit of spiritual satisfaction.

Musical is a form of art in a popular style. Its main audience is ordinary people. Therefore, the translation of musical lyrics should focus on the appreciation ability of target audience and be close to the public [1]. Musicals have become an important carrier for overcoming language and cultural barriers, achieving cultural exchange, and engaging in cross-cultural communication. Therefore, the translation of musicals plays a vital role in communicating the original meaning to the target audience.

There are many problems in the current musical translation market, such as lack of accuracy, lack of authenticity, and lack of musical appreciation. These issues will not only affect the audience's understanding of the plot and reduce their viewing experience. It also hinders the dissemination of

main ideas and cultural elements carried by musicals in China. Therefore, in the process of translating musicals, choosing the appropriate translation strategy is the key premise to get the result of cultural communication.

With the wide spread of musical, its form is not only limited to the theater, but also produced some recorded versions for online audiences to enjoy and learn. The subtitles are fleeting. The subtitles that have been broadcast cannot be seen again and again. It has been repeatedly thought that even if people can rewind freely, it will affect the viewer's mood and the continuity of the story [2]. Therefore, subtitle translation also plays a very important role in the dissemination of culture contained in musicals. Subtitle translation must consider the audience's psychology and be easy to understand [3]. At the same time, it should be able to give the audience the most effective information within a few seconds of staying in the audience's view, and considering the limited screen area, the translation should be short and easy to understand.

## **1.2. The Introduction of Cats**

The Cats, one of the four classic musicals, was created by the world famous composer Andrew Lloyd Webber and adapted from the fairy tale poem collection Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats written by the famous poet T.S. Eliot for children. The Cats, which came out in 1981, not only swept seven Tony Awards, but also pocketed Oliver, Grammy Awards and other global awards. It continues to break the box office and continuous performance records of the west end and Broadway. All audiences are immersed in this audio-visual feast, which is of great significance to the change and expansion of their musical aesthetics. Therefore, its translation is of great significance to the domestic audience. In this paper, the 1998 version of the musical is selected for translation study.

## **1.3. Introduction to the Source of Translation**

Due to the small number of translated texts of Cats, the translation selected in this paper is from YYeTs, an online group, which was initially established by several overseas students who translated a large number of overseas popular films and TV dramas for domestic fans and public classes in foreign famous universities, and gained a large number of fans due to the high quality translation. The process of translation seems to be a process of cross-cultural communication, but it is actually a process of cross-cultural communication. There are great differences between Eastern and Western cultures, especially in language conventions and ways of thinking [4]. The translation of YYeTs in Cats presents unique Chinese characteristics. Therefore, this paper will take YYeTs translation as an example to study the use of domestication and foreignization strategies in musical translation.

## **2. The Concept of Domestication and Foreignization**

Friedrich Schleiermacher, a famous German translator and philosopher, pointed out that there are only two translation strategies [5]. One is that the translator tries not to change the original text so that readers can fully understand the cultural differences in the text. The other is that the translator tries to make the original text into the target language culture, so that readers can understand the text more easily. Later, Lawrence Venuti, an American translation theorist, discussed and summarized this view, and formally put forward the concepts of domestication and foreignization in *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* in 1995 [6].

### **2.1. Domestication**

Domestication refers to the translation strategy of adopting a transparent and fluent style in translation to minimize the strangeness of the foreign text for target language [7]. It is to integrate the source

language text into the culture of the target language. Domesticating a text consists in concealing the cultural otherness of a text and adapting it by replacing foreign elements with a more familiar culture [8]. At all levels of linguistics, including sentence patterns, there is no fixed form to convey the original content, Eugene Nida, an American translation theorist said, makes it easier for the target language audience to understand the plot and cultural connotation [9], so as to achieve cultural equivalence between the source language and the target language [10].

## 2.2. Foreignization

Different from domestication, Venuti, the representative of foreignization translation, believes that the purpose of translation is not to eliminate language and cultural differences in translation, but to express such differences. Venuti's definition of "foreignization" can be summarized as "deviating from the local mainstream values and preserving the language and cultural differences of the original text". According to Venuti's views, Chartreworth Mark and Shuttleworth Cowie defined foreignization as "translation that deliberately breaks the target language convention to a certain extent in order to preserve the foreignness of the original text." In short, it is based on the source language. In the process of translation, the language forms, habits and cultural traditions in the source language should be retained as much as possible, so as to make the audience close to the author and retain the exotic flavor for the readers of the translation.

## 3. Domestication and Foreignization in the Translation of *Cats*

### 3.1. The Strategy of Domestication

#### Example1

*Are you mean like a minx?*

你邪恶如浪女吗?

Minx means a charming woman who exploits men with her sexuality. The translator directly brought it into Chinese culture and translated it into "浪女", which has the same meaning as minx, but the words are more concise and idiomatic, which not only takes into account the short and concise lyrics of the musical, but also makes it easier for the target language audience to understand the characteristics of Jellicle cats.

#### Example2

*It can be no surprise.*

那没啥稀奇。

This sentence means that it is no surprise that Bustopher Jones, who is known as the upper class of St. James street, appeared in the club. The translator translated it into "没啥稀奇", a fair colloquial and simple word in dialects of Northern China [11]. Colloquial translation is more vivid, and it is more flexible with tone, rhythm, emotion and movement, making the audience experience more real.

#### Example3

*Oh, my eyes!*

喔, 老天!

This sentence is to express the surprise of Jellicle cats when they saw the venerable old Deuteronomy. Instead of translating it into "my eyes!", according to the original text, the translator chose to translate the word into a more familiar exclamation "老天", which is often used in the daily life of Chinese people. At the same time, it also reflects the religious beliefs of ancient China, making the readers and audience of the translation feel more empathetic.

#### Example4

*His coat's very shabby.*

他衣衫褴褛。

*He's thin as a rake.*

他骨瘦如柴。

*And he suffers from palsy that makes his paw shake.*

他受瘫痪之苦，足掌抖动。

This sentence describes the appearance and state of Gus, that is, the theater cat. The first sentence corresponds to the idiom according to its meaning, which is also more acceptable to the public. The second sentence should be translated as “薄如耙子” according to the original meaning, and the translator chooses to bring it into Chinese culture, so as to translate it into “骨瘦如柴” known to the target audience. The use of idioms integrates the culture of the target language into translation, especially when the meaning and usage of the idiom coincide with the meaning of the source language in the original text [12]. There is no corresponding word in the translation, which reflects the translator's understanding and thinking. The choice of this word fully expresses the content, and the structure of the translation corresponds to the original text, realizing the coincidence of form. The third sentence still retains the four-character idioms used in the previous sentences. It reads with a sense of rhythm and music and is more catchy.

### 3.2. The Strategy of Foreignization

#### Example 1

*We know how to dance a gavotte and a jig.*

跳加伏特和捷格舞。

#### Example 2

*And waltzes by Strauss.*

以及史特劳斯的华尔兹。

The above two examples show that the translator has chosen the foreignization strategy for the dance existing in the foreign culture in the original text, and retained a sense of exotics, so that readers can learn some common knowledge about foreign culture while experiencing the cultural differences. At the same time, it can add foreign cultural information to the target language, enrich the target language culture, and promote the diverse development of culture [13].

#### Example 3

*Peter*

彼得

#### Example 4

*Victor*

维克多

In this translation, all names adopt Foreignization Strategies. First, it improves the translator's translation efficiency, and allows the readers and audiences to more directly experience the differences between Chinese and foreign cultures, which is conducive to the exchange and integration of Chinese and foreign cultures.

## 4. Conclusion

As a popular cultural carrier, musicals reflect the cultural genes such as the values and customs of their countries of origin. The musical can only be transformed from one language to another, and its beauty of form, content and style can only be increased and not determined. Due to the objective differences of culture, in order to make the target language audience fully understand the content of the musical and show the same reaction as the source language audience, translators must pay attention to the words and sentences with implied culture encountered in the text.

In the above discussion, it can be found that translators use the domestication strategy more frequently than the foreignization strategy in the process of translation. There is a rule in skopos theory proposed by Vermeer which says, the purpose of translation varies according to the recipient. The translator should adopt the most appropriate translation strategies in order to achieve the purpose of effectively disseminating culture [14]. As a subtitle translation of musicals, the translation selected in this paper needs to meet the characteristics of concise lyrics of musicals and rich in rhythm and the sense of music. At the same time, it also needs to consider the effects of subtitles and convey the most accurate information to the audience in the simplest language in a short time. Chinese cultural connotation is usually simple and concise, which precisely adapts to the characteristics of subtitles. Therefore, this translation uses four-character idioms, which is concise and catchy. In the limited display space, the target language audience can get more effective information, and it is easier for them to understand the content and development of the story, so as to enhance the viewing experience.

At the same time, some necessary words and sentences to convey foreign culture are translated with Foreignization Strategies to improve the fixity and unity of the expression derived from the target language, which is conducive to keeping the expression of the target language consistent with the expression of the source language in different contexts.

In fact, there is no absolute use of domestication or foreignization in musical translation. If the foreignization strategy is used in the translation of the whole text, the culture of the original text may be fully conveyed, but the audience's feelings will be ignored, making it difficult for them to understand the plot, which will not achieve the purpose of cultural communication [15]. However, if the domestication strategy is used completely, the unique cultural factors in the original text and the cultural background of the text will be ignored, which will hinder the cross-cultural communication between the two countries. In the process of translation, the usage of both two strategies can achieve the best translation results. Therefore, the translator needs to ensure that the translation achieves the harmonization of domestication and foreignization. The translation needs to grasp the connotation of the original text and find a balance between the similarities and differences of language and culture, so as to maximize the recognition of the translation in the target audience.

Subtitle translation of musicals is an art with different kinds of skills [16]. In order to achieve the purpose of cultural exchange and mutual learning, it is not advisable to translate strictly according to the original word correspondence in the specific translation process. Translators should combine domestication and foreignization strategy during the translation. At the same time, translators should avoid several overused forms of domestication summarized by Liu Yingkai according to the current situation of Chinese translation such as the abuse of four-character idioms [17]. In the future translation of musicals, translators can continue to pursue a translation version recognized by the target audience.

## References

- [1] Zhao Y.Q. (2023) *Mu Di Lun Shi Jiao Xia De Yin Yue Ju Fan Yi: Ji Yu <Mao> Liang Ge Zhong Yi Ben De Bi Jiao Fen Xi (Musical translation from the perspective of Skopos Theory: Based on two Chinese versions of cat comparative analysis)*, *Journal of Jiangxi Vocational and Technical College of Electricity*, 36, 145-147.

- [2] Zhang, Q.H. (2009) *Fan Yi Mu Di Lun Yu Ying Shi Zi Mu Fan Yi*(Skopos Theory and subtitle translation), *Journal of Xi'an Eurasia Vocation University*, 73-78.
- [3] Wu, Y. (2019) *Cong Gui Hua Yu Yi Hua Jiao Du Qian Xi Ying Wen Dian Ying Zi Mu Zhong De Fan Yi Ce Lue--Yi Dian Ying Green Book <Lv Pi Shu> Wei Li* (Analysis of translation strategies in English film subtitles from the perspective of domestication and Foreignization -- Taking the film *Green Book* as an example), *Tourism Today*, 7, 37.
- [4] He, C.H., Dai X.L. (2023) *Kua Wen Hua Jiao Ji Shi Jiao Xia Ying Han Fan Yi Gui Hua Yu Yi Hua Ce Lue Xuan Ze* (Strategies of domestication and Foreignization in English Chinese translation from the perspective of intercultural communication), *Journal of Taiyuan Urban Vocational College*, 2, 202-204.
- [5] Schleiermacher, F. (1813) *On the Different Methods of Translating*.
- [6] Venuti, L. (1995) *The Translators' Invisibility: A History of Translation*, 19-20.
- [7] Shuttleworth, M., Cowie, M. (1997) *Dictionary of Translation Studies*, 43-59.
- [8] Henriques, C.H. (2013) *Foreignness and Familiarity: An Investigation into the Effects of Foreignization and Domestication in Translation*, 14-56.
- [9] Nida, E. (1964) *Toward A Science of Translating*.
- [10] Guo, J.Z. (2000) *Contemporary Translation Studies in USA*, 65-67.
- [11] Wang, J.X. (2023) *A Study on the Subtitle Chinese Translation of the Musical Cats from the Perspective of Multimodal Discourse Analysis*, 27-51.
- [12] Liang, X.Q., Gao, Y.Q. (2015) *Mu Di Lun Zhi Dao Xia De Yin Yue Ju <Bei Can Shi Jie> Zi Mu Fan Yi Ce Lue Tan Jiu* (On subtitle translation strategies of the musical *les misérables* under the guidance of Skopos Theory), *KAOSHI ZHOUKAN*, 54, 19-20.
- [13] Li, Z.Z., Yang, S.Q. (2014) *Yi Hua Ce Lue Chu Li Wen Hua Que Sheng De You Shi* (The Advantages of Foreignization Translation Strategy in Dealing with Cultural Default), *Cai Zhi*, 1, 231.
- [14] Vermeer, H.J., Reiss, K. (1984) *General Foundations of Translation Theory*.
- [15] Yang, H.Y., Liu, J. (2022) *Study on Subtitle Translation of Documentary Ben Cao Zhong Hua Based on the Domestication and Foreignization Strategy*, *Proceedings of the 9th International Conference on Education, Language, Art and Inter-cultural Communication (ICELAIC 2022)*, 51.
- [16] Li, X. (2021) *Qian Xi <Zhong Guo Ji Zhang> Zi Mu Fan Yi Zhong De Gui Hua Yu Yi Hua Ce Lue*(On domestication and Foreignization in subtitle translation of *Captain China*), *Overseas English*, 18, 38.
- [17] Liu, Y.K. (1987) *Gui Hua-- Fan Yi De Qi Lu*(Domestication -- the wrong way of translation), *Modern Foreign Languages*, 2, 58-64.