

Analysis of the Characteristics and Translation Skills of American Slang in the Big Bang Theory

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Abstract—Slang is a carrier of culture and an important part of multiculturalism, which is informal language characterized by plain or colloquial words. Slang used in America has developed its own features which are integrated into all aspects of American people's daily life. This paper aims to explore the characteristics of American slang and study the translation skills of slang expressions based on the slang in the American TV series *The Big Bang Theory*.

Index Terms—American slang, translation skills, *The Big Bang Theory*

I. INTRODUCTION

According to the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2014), Slang is a very informal and sometimes offensive language used by people belonging to a particular group, such as young people or criminals.

“Slang denotes an informal vocabulary composed chiefly of novel-sounding synonyms (and near synonyms) for standard words and phrases. It is often associated with undignified persons and groups” (Bradstreet, 2010). It has surprising implications for rudeness or disrespect, especially regarding established attitudes and values in mainstream culture.

The idea mentioned above is about the definition of slang, but in fact, all spoken slang in the United States is regarded as American slang. American English distinguishes itself from other language with unique characteristics. And the existence of a large amount of American slang is one of its characteristics. American slang is a sort of colloquial language. Apart from this marked characteristic, there bears other features in slang. For example, the special features include a sense of humor, novelty, conciseness, ephemerality, acronyms, time efficiency, and common colloquialism.

The Characteristics of American Slang

Humor and Novelty

Slang is the product of young people's favorite games and lively activities such as playing with words, renaming things and actions. Some people invent new words for the sake of novelty, or misuse old ones, while others chase them for the pleasure of fashion. People create slang terms for the sense of novelty and the expression of new ideas and new things. It is accepted by both upper and lower classes, especially college students, who tend to use modern vocabulary and have formed a characteristic style. Most slang terms have novel conception, producing humor and witty effects and have been being wildly liked in recent years. For instance, “Social butterfly” means a person who is good at talking and moves around people laughing and talking all night long. The original meaning of “social butterfly” bear nothing connection with talking, but the image of the words is just vivid and imaginable. Another example, “to pan out” means that someone has a successful result. However, the original meaning of the “pan” is a kind of metal container used for cooking or baking. Its meaning comes from a way to search for gold. Gold miners would take a handful of sand and mix it with water in a pan. Sometimes, their efforts “panned out” meaning they found gold. American slang identifies its characteristics in the course of experiment, showing a great interest in novelty and bearing a strong desire for creative and humorous forms.

Conciseness

Conciseness may not be the soul of American slang, but it is the main features of slang. Slang is brief and easy to speak out. One slang term can easily express the meaning which cannot be done by a standard word. For instance, dope (very cool), savage (someone is bold and don't care about the consequence), I can't even (difficult to handle), fad (a craze), salty (someone who is agitated) and so on.

Ephemerality

Ephemerality and novelty are unique features. Most slang is ephemeral. We all know that slang spreads very fast, and it is unstable and temporary. Patridge Eric (1989) has pointed out that its brevity is important because almost everyone has noticed that a large number of slang terms are accepted by the masses and classes, most of which are short-lived. When they disappear, they are almost immediately replaced by other novel words. People create those slang terms for the sense of novelty and the expression of new ideas and things in their life. To name only a few, the words “doozy”; “hit it off” and “smart pants” are the examples.

Acronyms and Time Efficiency

American slang is used to use the abbreviation in their life. There existed a large amount of slang formed by shortening or acronym. Some people use abbreviations for making mysterious, especially for those popular slang, others

speak in that way for saving time. For example, b.a.e (before anyone else) means your boyfriend or girlfriend or your significant other. G.O.A.T (greatest of all time). It stands for the absolute best at something.

Common Colloquialism

As we mentioned before, slang is frequently regarded as colloquial language. The words of slang mostly come from common people and are used by them in daily conversations. Highly colloquial is the soul of slang. Like colloquialisms and idioms, slang is used in informal conversation or informal essays. The usage of slang not only implies the relationship between the speaker and the listener, but also expresses the speaker's familiarity towards a certain language.

II. CHARACTERISTICS OF AMERICAN SLANG IN THE BIG BANG THEORY

Sitcom, short for the situation comedy, is a series of regular characters appearing in one episode after another. In the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, it is described as a funny television programme in which the same characters appear in different situation each week. American sitcom is actually one of those sitcoms that have some funny plots in each episode and is well-received in recent years. The following is going to talk about some characteristics of American sitcom named The Big Bang Theory.

A. *The Sense of Humor of American Slang*

Now, people are living in a new era characterized with affluent information, globalization and cross-culture communication. Cultures with distinctive backgrounds affect strongly in people's life. Movie and TV series, as the significant carrier of cultures, have played a significant role in people's everyday life, even working as a way in the cross-culture communication. The outstanding character of video film is that it can present the complete scene, the combination of sound and vision is dynamic, immediate and accessible. This means that communication can be expressed in context, and language learners can easily perceive many factors in communication. Truly, now in China, movies, sitcoms or other videos are employed as a tool for English teaching due to their authenticity. Even some linguists propose that watching video could be a good way to soak in English, and it turns out to be effective and acceptable, especially among young generation. Multitudes of American sitcoms have been imported nowadays, including This Is Us, The Good Doctor, and The Big Bang Theory. The Big Bang Theory, with its vivid, funny description of the story among four extraordinary scientists and their women neighbors, has pulled most audience interest, not just for pleasure but a way of language learning. The following is a transcription from The Big Bang Theory.

Example 1 (Season 12 Episode 14)

Howard: So now we have to download all these forms and fill them out.

Sheldon: We get it. Your life is great. Stop rubbing in it.

Amy: Yeah, quit it.

Sheldon: Is one of the forms the 599B/C?

Howard: Yeah.

Sheldon: All right, well, I don't want to spoil anything, but you might want to start practicing your "signature". Because, it has a doozy of a typo.

In this instance, Howard and his wife Bernadette's privacy were disturbed by their neighbor's floodlights on the balcony. To solve this problem, they decided to turn to the special administration for help. And then, they were required to fill out the questions on the sheet. To their surprise, Sheldon should have found some mistakes about the sheet. Actually, it is typical of Sheldon to be picky about everything especially in the field of knowledge. He is such a man who is keen on scientific researches and good at explaining things by using all the theories he has known. In the above-mentioned, the slang "doozy" means "notable". In that dialogue, Sheldon wanted to point out the notable mistakes appearing on the sheet and make Howard notice them. That's the Sheldon's way to express his humor and sarcasm in this sitcom.

B. *The Cultural Connotation of American Slang*

Culture demonstrates itself in the forms of language. Slang, which is more than an exclusively form of language, also mirrors people's life. Every slang has a sort of experience involving into language and works as a map for us about all areas of different culture. Slang is such a language that embodies a plentiful of social functions of a language. So, to some extent, we may conclude that the prevalence of slang has something to do with its culture. For this reason, American slang, regarding new concepts and development with novel words, is a notable example of the interaction of society, culture, and language. Being similar to any other culture, American slang consists of a lot of cultural connotations and this can be seen in The Big Bang Theory.

Example 2 (Season 12 Episode 1)

A girl in a store: Yeah, It's weirdly quiet. Nobody's on the street.

A man in a store: Hhh...well. That's strange.

A girl in a store: You're thinking what I'm thinking?

A man in a store: They cut that meteorite open and unleashed a space plague?

A girl in a store: Exactly.

A man in a store: Let me just lock up here.

(Sheldon just arrived at the store and he began to knock the door that was locked.)

Sheldon: Open the door please

A man in a store: Sorry, we are closed.

Sheldon: This is going on Yelp.

In this dialogue, Sheldon was going to a store to get something but he was refused by the man in the store. So he said to the man that he decided to post this bad service on the “Yelp”. In this instance, the word “Yelp” is a review forum run by American multinationals located in San Francisco, California. It develops, mandates and sells Yelp.com and Yelp mobile apps, which publishes crowd-sourced reviews about local businesses. Now in American it develops into a representation of a complaint platform that every customer can share their true feelings about the service in business.

C. *The Use of Rhetoric in American Slang*

According to Wikipedia, Rhetoric is the art of discourse, designed to improve the ability of an author or speaker to inform, persuade, or motivate a specific audience in a given situation. Sometimes, the use of rhetoric can polish the lines in the movie and add an extra sense of humor. The following is an example from The Big Bang Theory.

Example 3 (Season 5 Episode 6)

(Sheldon seated on a bench with a stranger doing a weird self-talking)

Sheldon: Look at the two of us. Me, a highly regarded physicist. The kind of mind that comes along once, maybe twice in a generation. You, the common man, tired from your labors as a stockbroker or vacuum cleaner salesman, or bootblack. But deep down inside, apparently, we’re just two peas in a pod. You’re the regular pea and I’m the kind of pea that comes along once, maybe twice in a generation. Rain. And the unremarkable alike. (The stranger with an umbrella opening his but Sheldon without umbrella could do nothing but waiting.)

Sheldon: Smart pants!

In this dialog, Sheldon was sad and started to express his dissatisfaction by using some irony words towards a stranger sitting beside him on the same bench. The phrase “two peas in a pod” means “being identical to each other”. Also, it is a metaphor to which belongs the figure of speech. In this instance, what Sheldon attempted to highlight is that he is identical to the stranger in appearance, but actually he is superior to the stranger on the mind and he, such a genius, hardly can be seen in several centuries.

D. *The Evil Words in American Slang*

Owing to the fact that slang was firstly used by people who lived at the bottom of the society, and many of them were uneducated. Evil words account relatively largely amount of proportion in slang. The purpose of TV series is to serve audience with joyful entertainment or meaningful knowledge. Therefore, when it comes to tackle with evil words in slang, translators oughtn’t only convey actor’s or actresses’ anger, hatred or any other strong emotion through translation, but also can’t let those words ruin all the play.

Example 4 (Season1 Episod17)

Penny: I need to use your window.

Leonard: Sure, go ahead.

Penny: Hey, jerk face, you forgot your ipod. (Throw something out of the window)

(Penny went back from the window and said to Leonard)

Leonard: What’s going on? Penny

Penny: Oh, let me tell you what’s going on. The stupid self-centered baster wrote about our sex life in his blog (Penny went to the window again)

Penny: Drop dead. You stupid self-centered bastard!

From this transaction, we can see that Penny use quite a few evil words such as “jerk face; baster; drop dead” to show her hatred towards her ex-boyfriend who dumped her ruthlessly and wrote their privacy on public media. The use of vulgar words in slang is an effective way to shape a character by showing his truly strong feelings. However, the translator ought to think thoroughly the translation of the vulgar slang words.

III. TRANSLATION SKILLS IN THE BIG BANG THEORY

When we watch a video, we would firstly be attracted by its image or sound and then we are intended to take notice of its translation in order to comprehend its connotation. In this way, therefore, a good translation can bring readers a satiated experience. A celebrated Chinese translator Liu Chongde (2003) once put forward a suggestion that a good translation should follow these three principles: faithfulness; expressiveness and closeness, which means the reproduction or the recreation in one language should be faithful to the original; be as expressive as the original and be as close to the original style as possible. A famous British translation theorist Newmark also deems that the translator tries to produce the same effect on the target reader as the original reader does on the source reader in communicative translation (2004, P56). Based on the theory we’ve known, the thesis also wants to discuss some translation skills used in The Big Bang Theory. Let’s explore how the translator achieves a better version of translation by using the following

skills.

A. *Literal Translation and Free Translation*

The so-called literal translation, superficially speaking, it strives to keep the sentiments and style of the original without altering the original words and sentences. Free translation is another translation method, which mainly aims at conveying the meaning and spirit of the original text rather than trying to reproduce the sentence patterns or rhetorical devices of the original text. The advantage of literal translation is that literal translation preserves the cultural characteristics of the source language, and retains its western flavor. Literal translation is as faithful as possible to the original text, so that the reader can better understand the original text. Literal translation promotes the communication and enrichment of the two languages while preserving the cultural characteristics of the source language. The free translation is used to translate a number of idioms and a large amount of slang in English and Chinese, to avoid the translation being too complicated and difficult to understand. Free translation is used to translate certain special words, and make the translations much more smoother. This method is most often used when the translator is unable to give literal translation. Here is an example from *The Big Bang Theory*.

Example 5 (Season 5 Episode 9)

Leonard: Oh, Hey You work for lunch shift?

Penny: Yeah. I've got eight pounds of salmon that's about to go bad. Do you know how to cook it?

Leonard: Not really.

Penny: Damme it. Should have liberated the iffy chicken. What are you and Professor Fussy face up to tonight?

When Leonard and Penny were talking along the stairs, Penny mentioned Sheldon who is considered as "fussy face". The word "fussy" usually means an extremely finicky attitude towards somebody or something. In this situation, the translator translated it into "挑剔鬼" in Chinese which has the same meaning or is equivalent to the word "fussy". So the word "fussy face" is a literal translation that expresses a vivid image of Sheldon who is always picky or fussy about anything.

Example 6 (Season 2 Episode 5)

(Penny and Leonard are in front of the elevator.)

Penny: We are really hitting it off.

Leonard: Don't look up. There's camera.

In the above-mentioned, the slang "hit it off" denotes that someone gets along well with another one. The word "hit it off", its literal meaning is something striking and it is dissimilar from its true meaning. So, in this case, the translator used its free translation "投机" to expose the close relationship between Penny and Leonard.

Example7 (Season11 Episode3)

Ruchi: You know, we could have gone somewhere more pregnancy-friendly.

Bernie: Oh, it's OK. One of the great thing about being pregnant is drinking cranberry juice out of a wineglass and watching people freak out.

Rajesh: Bernie!

Bernie: Oh, damn.

Sturat: Hey! What are the odds?

In this example, Bennie was staying with her colleague Ruchi drinking cranberry juice when Sturat and Rajesh happened to see her. She was a little embarrassed that she had just told a tall tale before their coming. The word "odds" in this dialogue usually means "ratio" that refers to the chances of something happening or being the case. In this situation, the translator translated into "有缘千里来相会", which has used free translation to explain its meaning. And this translation skill is close to the original idea of the scriptwriter.

B. *Annotation*

An annotation is often used to add short notes to a book or piece of writing to explain parts of it. In this TV series, it's common for us to see some obscure scientific knowledge or some special terms. To help us understand the dialogue better, we can still find annotation on the screen or beside the subtitle. The following is about Raj's introduction about wine.

Example 8 (Season 5 Episode 14)

(Howard and Bernadette went into the house together.)

Raj: Can I pour you some wine? I think you'll enjoy it. The traditional choice with Peking duck is a Sauvignon Blanc, but Siri suggested an off-dry Riesling. I wasn't sure but I didn't want to have an argument with her in the middle of Trade Joe's.

In this instance, we can see both "sauvignon blanc and off-dry Riesling" have annotation on the screen. For Chinese audience, Sauvignon blanc or off-dry Riesling are both unknown for them. So, to ensure audience can enjoy the plot better, annotations are put on the upper part of the screen to explain its meaning. This is not only a good way to transfer a different culture but also a way to let the translation be faithful to the original.

C. *Transliteration*

Transliteration adopts the way of directly quoting the pronunciation of words, ensuring that the same thing has the

same definition in both languages, ensuring the same connotation and extension, and achieving functional equivalence. Every word has connotative meaning and extended meaning. In cultural communication, if you must find a word in the target language for translation, it will inevitably make the original words lose some meaning. So, finding a correspond or similar sound in its targeted language is a good way to narrow the gap between the source language and targeted language. Here is a phenomenon in *The Big Bang Theory*.

Example 9 (Season 5 Episode 9)

Sheldon: Oh, dear lord, get away from me, you monster !

Sheldon: Shoo! Shoo! Be gone!

Sheldon: There's a bird outside window, and he won't go away.

Penny: Oh really? On top of everything else, you're afraid of birds?

In the example 9, "Shoo" is one transcription that embodies Sheldon's scary about birds. In this example, actually there is no word in Chinese that can be equivalent to the word "shoo". So, to narrow this cultural gap, the translator translated it into the Chinese character "去" which means "leave" in Chinese. In the same time, we can also find that the use of transliteration has also followed both "expressiveness" and "closeness" from three principles of Liu Chongde.

Example 10 (Season 11 Episode 2)

Leonard: Hey, how's it going?

(Sheldon stared at Leonard with dissatisfaction and said "pff" slightly)

Leonard: What? You got something to say?

Sheldon: I think I just said it.

Sheldon: p-f-f. pff!

Leonard: We are scientists. Isn't that what we're supposed to do ?

Sheldon: Oh, what would you know about the truth?

In this instance, Sheldon was angry for that Leonard publicly maligned the love of his life, the lady physics. Therefore he used "pff" to show his hatred and emotion. Pff was translated into the Chinese character "呸". However, in Chinese, there is no such word that is equivalent to "pff", Out of our expectation, the translator adopted its similar sound "呸" in Chinese character which not only convey a message but also retain the same style of the message.

D. Domestication

Domesticating translation minimizes the heterogeneity of the source text by transforming heterogeneous elements into the content familiar to readers of the target language. (Venuti Lawrence, 1995,p96) This method of "replacement" means replacing the English cultural-loaded expression using the Chinese expression, which may be similar in form and same in meaning or different in form in order to reduce the strangeness of the English expression by using a fluent, natural-sounding Chinese form for our reader's preferences. Here is an extract from *The Big Bang Theory*.

Example11 (Season 5 Episode 9)

Penny: Did Sheldon change the Wi-Fi password again?

Leonard: Yeah. It's "Penny already eats our food. She can pay for Wi-Fi". Get No spaces.

Penny: If you can't get me to stop eating your food, what makes you think you can get me to stop using your Wi-Fi?

Sheldon: I believe that you're capable of great change. (我相信你还是会浪子回头的)

In this case, Penny was asking for the Wi-Fi password, but to her surprise, Sheldon changed their Wi-Fi password for revenge. The original text "be capable of great change" is an English way to express a change, but when we take a look at its translation, it is an absolutely traditional colloquial Chinese expression which narrows the cultural gap in this way. The use of domestication in translation has added a sense of intimacy in the course of understanding a culture

IV. CONCLUSION

By studying the characteristics and translation skills of American slang, the paper finds out that American slang is becoming more acceptable for its unique features in a certain situation. Its simplicity, humor, novelty and cultural connotation are accepted in different ways for achieving different effects. And people often use slang in some limited occasions, such as among friends or family members. The paper also discusses the translation skills used in the translation of slang expressions. To achieve a better understanding toward subtitles, literal translation can never be enough. Sometimes literal translation can convey the message of the source text, but it's not attractive for audience. Take *The Big Bang Theory* as an example, simply translating the meaning of the scripts regardless of the humor of the sitcom will make the sitcom less interesting and attractive to Chinese audience. So, to ensure that the target language speaker enjoys the sitcom to the full extent, transliteration, free translation and other translation skills can be taken into consideration for translators.

As a matter of fact, much more need to be talked about American slang because of its language varieties in American English. Nevertheless, the author is confined to his limited knowledge about this field and can't find out all the examples explaining characteristics in American slang or examples of all the applications of translation skills. Nowadays, slang has been widely used by people and is being accepted gradually in American society. Therefore, it is of great necessity to know more about it. Watching American sitcoms is an effective way of learning English and slang

as a part of sitcoms is worth exploring. In the process of learning slang, we can not only tell the attitudes reflected by the speaker but also take in an alien culture.

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