

Kaixin Chu

Heather Ringo

UWP 001

10 December 2021

AVT ---- Modern Babel Tower: Merits and Challenges Explained

Abstract

Squid Game reflects Netflix success in global marketing. One of the most important reasons is the availability of multi-language subtitles, as a mode of audiovisual translation. This attributes to the conventions of translation in human history.

However, due to the high challenges of acculturation of languages from Korean to English, to some Korean Americans who speak both Korean and English, they found some very inaccurate dialogue in that show. So this article will mainly focus on the introduction of audiovisual translation, challenges of audiovisual translation to improve the viewing experiences, and the explanation on why sometimes subtitles are so difficult to understand even though the translators may take their best efforts of doing so.

Thesis statement:

Streaming services such as Netflix benefits from multi-choices of AVT but they still have to improve AVT by overcoming the challenges of cultural references, media restriction, and inapplicable practices.

Introduction:

If there is a phenomenal cultural product that gains global attention this year, it

would undoubtedly be the South Korean TV series *Squid Game* directed by Hwang Dong-hyuk and starring with Lee Jung-Jae. Since it firstly arrived on Netflix in September 17th, according to “What’s on Netflix”--the website built by Netflix itself to help subscribers find content on Netflix, till October 25th there are 142 million global views of *Squid Game* that undeniably became the most popular TV series all over the world. Frankly, it is an unarguable fact that the audiences from both English-speaking countries and non-Asian countries are starting to pay huge attention to Korean pop culture since *Parasite* won the Academy for the best picture as well as the huge success of fashionable boy band BTS. In this case, *Squid Game* seems reasonable to be known since Netflix also gave big supports to global cultural production, especially Korea, Mexico, Spain, etc.

It is not merely success of culture nor financial support of advertising. Another crucial factor that cannot be ignored is to a large extent Netflix tackled the concerns of translation that exist very long time throughout the history of media.

What is translation? Based on OED, translation means “The action of converting from one language to another and related senses”. Where may people find translation? People are able to find translation on anywhere available for language. And the audiovisual contents like TV shows, films, undertaking the property of culture, are capable to be spread globally with very developed internet nowadays. To call a specific mode of translation for audiovisual content, academics of linguistic study officially named it AVT, audiovisual translation.

AVT has two fundamental modes: subtitling and dubbing. And advanced digital

technology boosts AVT industry. Taking *Squid Game* as an example, *Squid Game* on Netflix is translated into 31 languages (Namkung 2021), which DVDs and Blue-rays are never able to exceed today. Because their mode of consumption is not flexible that disc sales has regional restriction based on related laws, third-world cultural production is very hard to find in DVD markets in United States. Because of their low-scale sales, it is possible to succeed in mainstream society. What's more, all DVDs have very limited amount of language translated into foreign language due to their consolidated marketing schemes. So streaming medias like Netflix, Amazon that provide video-on-demand services outweighed subsequently because people are free to adjust subtitles or dubs just via clicking the option button. It greatly helps audiences under the influences of globalization to find more available cross-cultural resources and entertainment. In interview with Frederic Chaume regarding to audiovisual translation, he confirms that "The more option we have, the better for the consolidation of a freer, multilingual and diverse audience."(Chaume 11).

Body paragraph:

But what about the quality of translation of audiovisual contents? Despite in 2017 Netflix announced there would be more employment for professional translators, it is reasonable to argue that AVT is still in need of improvement and appropriate translation cannot be granted all the time. With the popularity of *Squid Game* throughout the world, subtitles of *Squid Game* received huge notices by audiences as well. There are several controversial dialogues that would probably mislead the audiences from other cultural background. According to NBC's article "Translators,

experts weigh in on ‘Squid Game’ subtitle debate”, the author Victoria Namkung raised the issue to the public, displaying comments from Korean bilingual speakers on English subtitles of Squid Game. Mayer, one of the bilingual speakers, posted some examples on Tiktok to show the huge discrepancy of meanings of the lines between Korean and English. And briefly, their explanation mainly focus on the cultural adaptation and audiences interpretation.

What she suggests is meaningful and worthwhile to consider. Because essentially culture does play a significant role to set a barrier of understanding between two mono-language speakers. In the book “Through the Language Glass” written by Guy Deutscher, he indicates that culture difference is inevitable to be reflected in the practice of language and therefore people cannot fully understand with each other because they interpret the world differently. People are born to speak a mother tongue, the original language would serve as a tool to shape people’s perception during the course of maturing. As Deutscher concerned “culture can leave deeper marks exactly where we do not recognize it as such, where its conventions have been imprinted so indelibly on impressionable young minds that we grow up to take them for something else entirely.”(Deutscher 7). Then he informs to readers that people in various culture would understand the word “culture” in very different ways. It is a very strong and potent evidence to support his claim because he utilized professional definition from dictionaries of different countries to elucidate the nuance.

And in AVT, it is reasonable to believe that subtitles cannot be culturally accurate and semantically understandable all the time because of media platform. We know

cultural references sometimes are impossible to be understandable for the audiences who grow up in other cultural background. So translators have to decide the most essential meanings and deliver them to the audiences with concise sentences. They can explain cultural references with parenthesis but there wouldn't be enough space on screen and that may seem too distracting on an official content.(Cho, 2021). For example, Mayer argues one of the controversial dialogues is from episode 6 at 28 sec, a character called Han Mi-nyeo. She is a gangster from lower class and the dialogue is about she feels annoyed so she says "What are you looking at?" in Korean which is a direct translation. (Netflix, 2021). But subtitles actually shows "go away" in English text on screen. It is very different translation here because the subtitle displayed on the black slot is not what she exactly says. It is safe to claim what she really means is "I don't want you to be here. I want you to go away." Because she is a adept liar and her personalities are fickle, that she never shows her real characters in front of people. By and large, it is easy to fully understand her line just by looking up the explanation in texts. But it is really impossible to make such explanation as a form of parenthesis on the screen just in order to let foreign audiences fully understand what's going on in Han's mind when there are only two seconds in total for a shot. It seems too redundant to explain only two words by identifying cultural references and characters' mind.

Although we know some flaws do exist in the translation, can bilingual speakers say the subtitles are unprofessional? No, because in AVT studies, cultural difference is a problem that exists till now. (Dwyer 11) "A core issue is the extent to which target

texts mirror source text practices,....--a basic dilemma in Translation Studies.”(Guillot, 114). Firmly, the essence of AVT from sources texts in to target texts is the process of domestication(Guillot, 114). In the article “Cross-cultural pragmatics and audiovisual translation”, Guillot confirms the idea that in a pragmatics perspective, the cultural synchrony which means the matches of sentence structure, meanings is very difficult to address no matter how sophisticated the strategies of translation are being used. (Guillot, 114). Especially on reflections of cultural spirits, it is not merely shown on the character’s dialogue. Back to the case, being reserved is considered as a norm in East Asian countries such as China, Korea, Japan, etc. It is consolidated cultural conventions that people under the influences would never speak what they really think. So “What are you looking at?” here is an implication of a complicated thought process like: I feel annoyed you are around here. Oh, you are looking at me. You are not supposed to look at me. I don’t even want you to be here. Leave me alone. However, in habits of English speaking, if asking what are you looking at, it literally means what’s being said. It is less emotional but clearer in expression. In this case, cultural a-synchrony appears because culture representation does play as a barrier that AVT cannot overcome verbally as well as cognitively. Consequently, as Cho considered, PhD in linguistic studies, she thinks the overall quality of translation is fine and she defends the English sutitlers of *Squid Game* that “Despite the good quality of the English translation, a meaning gap inevitably exists between the original Korean and the English subtitles due to the untranslatable”. (Cho, 2021).

Method:

I asked my professor Jesse Drew who studies media theory for CDM department, he introduced me a book called “Reception studies and Audiovisual Translation”. The book gave me a lot of information and insights about audiovisual translation. I find an article named “Triangulation of online and offline measures of processing and reception in AVT” written by Stephen Doherty and Jan-Louis Kruger. They convinced me to quit quantitative study of audiences’ reception that he says “Due to the complexity of controlling for participant variables and experiment materials, pure experiments are often difficult to implement.” So I decide to do qualitative research by finding my case study because it enriches the interpretation and helps clarify the theory. The method they call is “immersion”.(Doherty, 95). It is used to make audiences immerse in fictional reality such as film. It is normally constructed by offline measures, letting the audience give feedback of how exactly they experience psychologically, spatially, or temporally during the viewing. And based on their methodology, it is more vivid and comprehensive to reflect the challenges of AVT on subtitles. I tried to initiate my research based on a film I watched before. I set me and my girlfriend as subjects. And she gave consent to my research. We are both adept to speak Mandarin Chinese as first language. And to control the variables, we were separated into different places so we didn’t have chance to communicate during the time of watching. The film we watched is called A Sun, a film originally dubbed in Mandarin Chinese. And what I decided to measure is the accuracy of subtitles, so we watched different language subtitles. The version she watched is both subtitled and dubbed in English, the language we understand but are not professional with. So she

is able to pretend to be an English speaker to a large extent. And the version I watched is the original subtitled and dubbed version. The reason I watch the original is because I would have the standard comprehension of what the dialogue in film is supposed to mean so I can avoid myself to be the tested subject that generates more deviation. And what we did after watching is to tell the experiences and compare the story we interpreted excluding the artistic exploration. And then I analyzed to what extent the impacts of translated subtitle affect her interpretation.

Findings:

Consequently, after discussing the interpretation of the plot excluding artistic analysis. The results match my expectation that mostly AVT well delivered the general plot but some specific dialogues are blurred due to the water-down translation which my girlfriend have ambiguous interpretation about it. It is clearer to analyze with a specific case. (see fig. 1).



Fig.1. Elder son has a conversation with his classmates who likes him. *A Sun*.

Directed by Mong-Hong Chung, Netflix, 2019.

As we see in the figure, the Chinese I heard is the boy says“不好意思, 跟你讲了一个这么不好听的故事, 还害你错过一班公车。” to the girl. If directly translating it into English, the line would be “I’m sorry, I’ve told you such a lousy story. I made you miss the bus.” which is the same as the English subtitle. It is safe to say the translation here is accurate in semantics. However, it sounds very weird because for people who understand the plot, the truth is he doesn’t actually make her stay with him, asking her to listen his story. The girl is willing to stay to hear the rest of the story if knowing what happened before this conversation. It is the case that literal translation is not appropriately used for. And for English speakers, the line doesn’t make sense because the logic is discontinuous. It would be better to translate “Sorry. This isn’t a good story and I apologize I make you miss the bus.” But the space doesn’t allow the long sentence and complicated structure. Also, cultural synchrony will be broken that the structure of the line should be correspondent between two languages. What’s more, culture as a barrier emerges because it relates to a notion of conventional morality in Chinese culture that . It simply means even though it is not mistake by him/her, he/she still needs to apologizes to the one who faces troubles because she/he was in the circumstance as well.

So in this sense, I and my girlfriend may also be hypercritical on the subtitles just like Korean bilingual speakers who criticize the English subtitles of *Squid Game* if I step out and contemplate the overall effect of subtitle as a professional translator following the basic operations deal with these difficulties. So honestly, even though the English subtitle translated here in some way cannot express that Chinese culture, it

does a responsible job on disseminating what the character originally wants to say and complies with the linguistic doctrines.

Conclusion:

Last but not least, although consolidated argument that challenges like cultural references are head-scratching for every trained translators, with the non-monoculture audiovisual content is rising, AVT nowadays becomes more viable since more accessibility of resources to another culture. In the first phase of designing under the multi-cultural circumstances as well as the interpretation level of audiences rising, the barrier between cultures are no longer massive just as Chaume says “The potential of AVT to overcome cultural barriers in the age of cosmopolitanism is more powerful than ever.” (Chaume 10).

Works Cited

A Sun. Directed by Mong-Hong Chung, Netflix, 2019.

Chaume, Frederic, Ranzato, Irene, and Zanotti, Serenalla. “*The challenges and opportunities of audiovisual translation. An interview with Frederic Chaume*”. *Cultus 2018*, 2018.

[Microsoft Word - Cultus_2018_issue 11.docx \(uniroma1.it\)](#)

Cho, Jinhyun. “*Squid Game and the ‘untranslatable’: the debate around subtitles explained*”. *The Conversation*, 13 October 2021,

[Squid Game and the 'untranslatable': the debate around subtitles explained \(theconversation.com\)](#)

Deutscher, Guy. *Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages*. 1st ed, Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Co, 2010, pp. 6-8.

[Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages - Guy Deutscher - Google Books](#)

Dwyer, Tessa. *Speaking in Subtitles: Revaluing Screen Translation*. Edinburgh University Press, 2017.

[Speaking in Subtitles: Revaluing Screen Translation - Tessa Dwyer - Google Books](#)

. Gulliot, Marie-Noelle. "Cross-cultural Pragmatics and Audiovisual Translation."

Audiovisual Translation: Theoretical and Methodological Challenges, edited by Yves Gambier, Sara Ramos Pinto, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2018, pp. 107-120.

https://search.library.ucdavis.edu/permalink/01UCD_INST/9fle3i/alma9981505955603126

Kruger, Jan-Louis, and Stephen Doherty. "Triangulation of Online and Offline Measures of Processing and Reception in AVT." *Reception Studies and Audiovisual Translation*, edited by Elena Di Giovanni, Yves Gambier, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2018, pp. 91-109.

[Reception studies and audiovisual translation - University of California Davis \(ucdavis.edu\)](#)

Moore, Kasey. "Every Viewing Statistic Netflix Has Released So Far (Oct 2021)." *What's on Netflix*, 25 October 2021.

[Every Viewing Statistic Netflix Has Released So Far \(October 2021\) - What's on Netflix \(whats-on-netflix.com\)](#)

Namkung, Victoria. "Translators, experts weigh in on 'Squid Game' subtitle debate." *NBC News*, 6 October 2021,

[Translators, experts weigh in on 'Squid Game' subtitle debate \(nbcnews.com\)](#)

Squid Game. Directed by Dong-hyuk Hwang, Netflix, 2021.