# A Study of the Boom of Open Course Translation

## From the Perspective of Translator's Subjectivity

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*Abstract*—**The paper presents a general introduction to the global open educational resources movement and then studies its translation activity from the perspective of translator's subjectivity. Translator's subjectivity bears three characteristics of initiative, restrictiveness and purposiveness. Translators of open courses give play to their initiative so as to overcome the constraints due to the specialty of audiovisual texts like subtitles and realize the purpose of importing foreign educational resources into China, and they are organized in a special way in the cyber-environment, which is different from the conventional translation organization. At the end of the paper the influence of the open course translation activity on translation is discussed.**

*Keywords—open courses; translator's subjectivity; subtitle translation; internet*

## I. INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of 2010, some videos of course lectures from the world famous universities, like Justice: what's the right thing to do and Positive Psychology from Harvard University, and Philosophy: Death from Yale University, etc. appeared on the Internet, with each video affiliated with Chinese and English subtitles on it. Since then a lot more courses have been translated, and the translation activity remains in full swing at present. The translated courses have been given warm welcome by Chinese netizens, which have quickly spread among them, attracted the extensive media coverage and produced great social influence. Then how are these courses translated? Who translate them? How is it possible to translate so many courses just within a short time? These are important questions which shall be addressed in the present research.

Since open course translation is a new phenomenon that has mainly emerged in the past few years, there are almost no books on its systematic study, and most materials are scattered on the Internet. The data in this thesis are collected bit by bit by the author with great efforts, and the sources of date collection are mainly as follows: the relevant web sites, online discussion forums, blogs, and the reports of the mass media. Furthermore, the author has applied to join in YYeTs[1], one of the major fansubs (short for fan-subtitled) that translates open courses, so that some information provided in the present paper is the first-hand material personally gained by the author.

## II. GLOBAL OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES MOVEMENT

On April 4, 2001 the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) announced the MIT OpenCourseWare (OCW) initiative. Since then more universities have participated in the movement such as Yale University, University of Washington and Stanford University. In 2005 the OpenCourseWare Consortium (OCWC) was founded, which was a worldwide community of hundreds of universities and associated organizations committed to promoting the sharing of educational resources on a global level and thus advancing global education.

Since most of the materials are in English, the global open educational resources movement is at the same time accompanied with its translation and localization. Currently OCW courses have been translated into at least ten languages including Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, French, Germany, Vietnamese and Ukrainian. There are six organizations that have formal agreements with MIT to translate MIT OCW course materials: Universia is a consortium of 11000 universities in Spain, Portugal and Latin American, having begun the Spanish and Portuguese translation of MIT OCW materials since 2003. Chulalongkorn University, one of the top universities in Thailand, engages in English-Thai translation of MIT OCW courses. Shahid Beheshti University, the national university in Iran, translates the English educational materials into Persian. The Turkish Academy of Sciences, an autonomous scholarly society acting to promote scientific activities on Turkey, works to translate open courses into Turkish. China Open Resources for Education (CORE) and OOPS are organizations that translate OCW courses into Simplified Chinese and Traditional Chinese respectively.

Apart from OCW, it is of necessity to talk about Technology, Entertaining and Design (TED). TED, as is claimed by itself, "We believe passionately in the power of ideas to change attitudes, lives and ultimately the world."(Quoted in Wikipedia: TED[2]) is for the mission of spreading ideas. TED talks cover a wide range of topics in science and culture, in which each speaker is given a maximum of 18 minutes to present his or her ideas in the most innovative and engaging ways. Past presenters include Bill Clinton, Bill Gates, Larry Page, etc. The talks have been offered for free viewing on the Internet since June 2006. The TED Open Translation Project, started in May 2009, is to make TED's

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[1] YYeTs is the short for "YY English TV shows", with "YY" as initials standing for the Chinese words "*yingyin*" (影音).

[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TED_(conference).

videos available "to the 4.5 billion people on the planet who don't speak English". (ibid) By the second anniversary of the project in May 2011, volunteer translators collaborated to complete over 18000 translations in 81 languages. (ibid)

### III. TRANSLATORS' SUBJECTIVITY IN THE OPEN COURSE TRANSLATION ACTIVITY

The translated contents of open courses include on the one hand texts with pure words, like lecture notes, syllabuses, reading materials, etc.; and on the other hand subtitles of videos of course lectures. Since the latter is special and differs from most conventional translation, and it dominates a large part of the open course translation activity and exerts greater influences, the subtitle translation of lecture videos is the main focus of this chapter.

#### A. Translators' Restrictiveness

Translators come across various constraints when subtitling videos of course lectures, and one of the major restraints comes from the objects as well as objective rules. The objects of open course translation are mainly subtitles of course lecture videos, and since subtitling is a type of constraint translation, problems are derived essentially from the constraints imposed on translators by the medium itself. Unlike the conventional written literary works that are printed words on pages of books, and thus that are "monosemiotic texts (that) use only one channel of communication and the translator therefore controls the entire medium of expression" (Gottlieb, quoted in Baker 2004: 245), the audiovisual programs are polysemiotic, having four channels of communication: " (1). the verbal auditory channel, including dialogue, background voices, and sometimes lyrics; (2). the non-verbal auditory channel, including music, natural sound and sound effects; (3). the verbal visual channel, including superimposed titles and written sign on the screen; (4). and non-verbal visual channel: picture composition and flow." (Ibid) The information provided by the four channels should be in synchronization, i.e. the subtitles are required to coordinate well with the moving pictures and the sound track. In other words, the subtitles must correlate with what the audience is seeing and hearing on the screen. Furthermore, all information in audiovisual program is instantaneous, for all discourses are presented in a style of continuous flow and the audiences have no way but to concentrate on the ongoing process, which is different from the conventional printed literature that can be reread at will. In short, subtitle translation is in essence translation with bounds. Subtitling, in addition to meeting the universal requirements set for translation in general, must meet the special standards of its own, for doing subtitle translation is similar to dancing with temporal, spatial and synchronous fetters.

In addition, translators' restraints are caused by the differentiation of course translation and TV series translation. Due to the academic nature of course lectures, the images on the screen are just a lecture hall with students and teachers, which may be not as attractive as the pictures in movies. What's more, the lecture is filled with utterances that are larger in number and more complex in lexis and syntax. As was said by Qiong Zhang, the fansubber herself when she accepted the interview of China Newsweak, "firstly, there are too many

sentences. One lecture usually contains about 1500 sentences, almost twice of an episode of American TV series. Secondly, the terms are extremely complex. For example, how Locke's Two Treaties of Government is translated into Chinese—the details need to be checked one by one." (Quoted in New Weekly 2010/10/23) For some courses like Multivariable Calculus and Vibrations and Waves, if the translator knows nothing about the academic field, it will be very difficult to understand them, let alone translating.

Apart from the restraints caused by the specialty of subtitle translation and the difference between course translation and TV series translation, translators get restraints from other aspects. Restricted by the capabilities of themselves, translators, especially some grass-root amateur translators, inevitably make mistakes at times; restricted by the exterior environment, fansubs often confront the predicament of lack of funds. All in all, restraints on translators, which is one of the qualities of subjectivity, cannot be denied.

#### B. Translators' Initiative

*1) Foresight to introduce advanced cultures:* Translators' initiative is manifested not only in how they translate, but more importantly in what they choose to translate. The choice of translating content reflects translators' attitude when they face two different cultures.

Before analyzing translators' culture initiative, we should first of all have a general idea on the two educational cultures in China and in Europe and America. The latter is advanced, which is embodied in both the content and form of foreign university courses. Western education is more developed in science, which can be seen from the Nobel Prize winters it has cultivated. Besides, its education in art and humanities is also of high level. "After seeing the open courses of Harvard, Yale and MIT, I know what is called 'humanistic spirits' exist indeed, and humanistic disciplines can also be very attractive. What the educators instruct are not only knowledge, but also morality, aesthetics, wisdom and ethics." (Xinmin Weekly 2010/12/2) By comparison, the education in China remains relatively backward, though it has made some progress compared with its past. Some students hate attending the class, claiming the lectures are boring and they can hardly learn anything useful; other students who attend the class are not for the sake of the lecture itself, but out of the fear of the teachers' check of their attendance and the failure in the examination, which may have serious consequences. Despite the constant appeal for education reform and the great efforts made on it, the issue of how to reform remains too complex and difficult to tackle overnight, and the reform of education has a long way to go.

When some cultural reform tendency is arising but still remains weak, the translator would initiatively choose relevant works to translate so as to cultivate more receivers and boost the strength of reform. Translating and introducing the open courses can help more people realize (and also bridge) the gap between education in China and that of the world advanced level and then promote the reform in China. With such foresight in mind, the course translators give full play to their initiative to translate and popularize foreign open courses in

China. What's more, despite no economic rewards any more, some voluntary translators insist on doing it.

"In January 2010, Hehe, the graduate student who has just arrived at University of Texas at Austin for his master degree in Educational Psychology, came across Michael Sandel's open course when he was searching the study material of psychology. 'I heard a lesson and felt it was good. So out of part-time interest I began to translate it. I spent a whole weak to dictate the original English, translate it into Chinese and make it into subtitle…'" (New Weekly 2010/9/6)

Similar to Hehe, many other translation volunteers take up their work without monetary consideration.

*2) Initiative in the translation process:* Open course subtitle translators exert their initiative to accomplish the pure word text transferring work, like what the ordinary translators do. Apart from it, they also give full play to their initiative to overcome the restraints brought about by the specialty of subtitles. Moreover, the author of the present thesis has joined in the open course translation group of YYeTs and personally witnessed how it works so as to illustrate the subjectivity of the translation community as a whole as well as that of the individual translator.

Firstly, the initiative of the fansub as a whole is embodied in its way of organization and its general operation procedures. Subtitle translation involves not only translating but also works like timing and editing due to its nature of audiovisual subtitling, which is closely connected with the Internet. With QQ-based workshops, YYeTs divides labors among translators, timers, editors, proofreaders, etc. The original course video is firstly given to the timer who times the program by defining the in and out time of each utterance. Then the timed lecture is sent to the translator, who is responsible for transferring it into Chinese. Editors and proofreaders are in charge of standardizing the translation, correcting the errors and making adjustments.

Secondly, the initiative of YYeTs is reflected in Time Machine, the subtitle editing software developed by the fansub. Subtitle translation is a kind of restraint translation, for it demands the synchronization of pictures, sound and subtitles, with the number of characters appearing in each subtitle limited. To overcome the restraints, YYeTs develops Time Machine, a kind of subtitle editor and requires translators to translate in it. "Fig. 1"
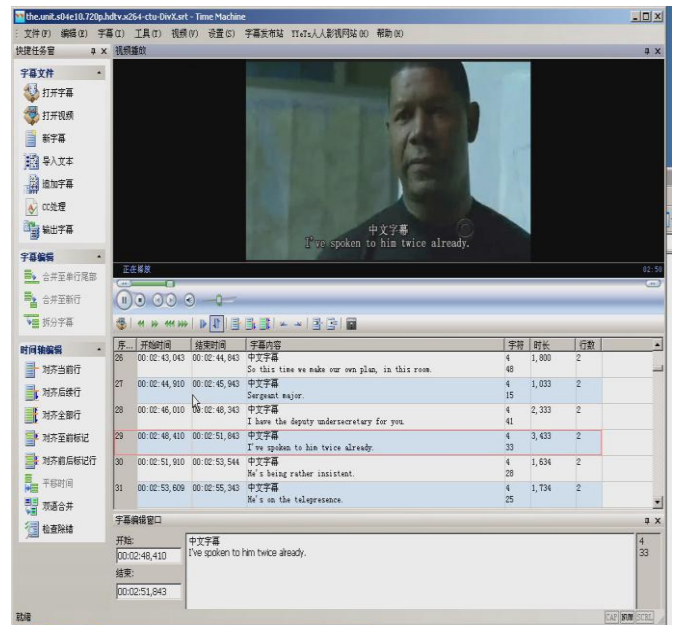


Fig. 1. Time Machine, a subtitle editor

As is shown in "Fig. 1", there is the video broadcasting window in the software, and translators can do subtitling while seeing the pictures and hearing the utterances, taking the polysemiotic nature of audiovisual programs into consideration. Furthermore, with the relative time appearing clearly in the window of the software, translators can control the time available of each subtitle, which means they can adjust it easily if it is not synchronized with the picture and sound. Furthermore, they can also control the length of each subtitle. If a line is too long or too short, they can separate it or combine it with the other line conveniently in the software.

Thirdly, translators' initiative is reflected in the process of language comprehension and sentence division. Take translation by ear for example. Since many videos of foreign course lectures are affiliated with no subtitles, translators first of all need to make a dictation about the English lecture sentence by sentence. It is particularly demanding for translators' skills on listening comprehension when he comes across a teacher who speaks relatively fast. Furthermore, as the following example, translators should learn to divide long sentences into short ones.

Example:

Chinese-English bilingual version:

1 今天我将用几天前发给你们的

I want to start my lecture today looking back to that handout I gave you

2 却没有进行讨论的资料开始我们的课程

—but didn't give you a discussion of—a couple of days ago,

3 从那篇叫做"好的作家和好的读者"的文章开始

from that essay Good Readers and Good Writers [see handout]

4 我曾在本学期课程的最开始引用过它

that I quoted at the very beginning of class this term.

(Cited from *The American Novel since 1945* subtitled by NetEase[3])

The above four subtitles make up a holistic sentence "I want to start my lecture today looking back to that handout I gave you—but didn't give you a discussion of—from that essay Good Readers and Good Writers that I quoted at the very beginning of class this term." If it is the conventional monosemiotic written text, the translator just needs to reproduce it as faithfully, expressively and elegantly as possible. However, in subtitling, restricted by the number of characters that can appear on the screen, the translator firstly has to divide the sentence into 4 parts (usually in terms of sense groups), and then translate them one by one. Translators should also pay attention to details like capitalization. In the example, the first letter "b" in Subtitle Two, "f" in Subtitle Three, and "t" in Subtitle Four are not capitalized, because they are not the beginning of an independent sentence.

Translators' initiative is also reflected in various other aspects. For instance, translators make the double transference from spoken code to written code and from one language to another; the fansubbers have spontaneous reflection on the translating methods of subtitles and share their favored academic thesis on translation among themselves; they summarize the differentiation of Chinese characters like "*dě dì dé* (的，地，得)" that have been mistakenly used frequently in the translated Chinese version. Limited by the length and focus of the present thesis, these aspects can not be elaborated on in detail. Nevertheless, the above analysis in this section has shown clearly the initiative of the translation community as well as individual translators in the translating process, which is essential for the accomplishment of the whole translation activity.

*C. Translators' Purposiveness*

According to the theory of translational subjectivity, subjects engage in social practice with purposes. All that they do to overcome various constraints and give full play to their initiative are just intended to achieve their intentions. Open course translators coming from various translation communities have the same goals, which are to break down the language barrier and enable vast Chinese netizens who do not understand English to enjoy the lectures coming from world-famous universities free of charge. They have realized their goals after exerting their initiative, which can be seen from the following aspects.

Firstly, a large number of course lectures have been translated. NetEase has published the collection of its translated open courses up to October 26, 2011. It shows that 1503 lectures of 131 courses have been translated, which reveals to some extent the large scale of the translation activity and the achievements they have made (The actual translated lectures and courses far outnumber the above, for the courses translated by other web portals like Sina and Sohu are not listed by NetEase at all). Their purpose of introducing foreign open courses is basically achieved.

Secondly, it has positive influence on the educational reform in China. With the translation and introduction of foreign open courses, numerous people, whether they are students or educators or urban white-collars, are discussing about the differences between education in China and the Europe and America, reflecting on the deficiencies of domestic education. On such a background gave birth to the open courses of Chinese universities. Though the birth of it is the demand of the Chinese people as well as China's educational reform itself, the translation and introduction of foreign open courses have direct and positive influence on it.

## IV. THE INFLUENCE OF THE OPEN COURSE TRANSLATION ACTIVITY ON TRANSLATION

The influence of the open course translation activity on translation is manifested in the following aspects.

Firstly, it brings about the extensive participation of the grass-root translators, a "scene" which was rarely seen before. Translating, as a professional activity, was mainly undertaken by some elites or professionals traditionally. For instance, in the 20th century the task of literary translation in China was mainly taken up by men of letters such as Lu Xun, Guo Moruo, Mao Dun and so on. Owing to the popularization and prevalence of foreign language education after the policy of reform and opening-up, students who graduate from the school of foreign languages have become the main force of professional or semi-professional translators. However, the participants in the open course translating are different from the conventional ones, for most translators are grass-root amateurs with diversified origins and backgrounds. Take the translators in TLF for example, "the members of the fansub cover the three generations who were born in the 1960s, the 1970s, and the 1980s, with their degrees including the four ranks of middle school, bachelor, master and doctor." (Baidu Encyclopedia : TLF[4]) Given the fact of their varied origins and the amateur nature of their translating activity, there are probably some deficiencies in some of their translated works, however, the open course translation activity shows that they are likely to constitute the translating team that can not be neglected, and that they are possible to play an essential role in introducing foreign cultures into China.

Secondly, the open course translation activity has shown that the Internet has enabled new ways of organizing a translation community with the operation procedures different from the traditional ones. The community makes rules for itself, regulating each member's right and obligation. Different members do not necessarily know each other in the real world, for they make use of forums, emails and chat software like QQ to keep in touch with each other. All relevant work such as assigning translation tasks, translating, delivering the finished translation documents and so on can get finished within the community. Despite its nature as a virtual community in the cyberspace, it divides labor distinctively among raw-material providers, translators, editors, proofreaders, etc., and there are

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[3] http://v.163.com/movie/2010/4/P/6/M6GJ9T1IB_M6GJAKJP6.html.

[4] http://baike.baidu.com/view/2664545.htm.

appointed people within the community who are responsible for every procedure of the whole work; and at the same time, different workers are organized to cooperate closely. Furthermore, thanks to the development of modern technology, their cooperation is becoming more and more convenient. They can not only send a small file like a picture or a song, but also transmit large amounts of data, like ten audiovisual programs with each 50-minute in length through bulk upload and download.

Thirdly, owing to open course translation activity, the interaction between translators and receivers has undergone dramatic changes towards more convenience and better efficiency with the help of the Internet. The web has enabled translators to release their translation to a potentially large audience online at greatly reduced expense and time delay, especially when it is compared with the conventional publication. Previously it took a long time in journey to send the translated work from the translator to the press, and more time in relevant publishing work such as editing and printing. When a book was finally published, a month or even longer time had already been passed, and a lot more time was needed to wait for the response of receivers. However, nowadays with no time in journey and printing, a translated work can get published with a click of the mouse, and receivers' response can be seen through the communication platform like posts on forums within the same day of its publication. Since it's easier and quicker for the receivers to express their views, the interaction between the two sides is more frequent, and the responses of receivers have greater influence on translators. Moreover, the receivers of a translated work in the cyberspace are large in number, for anyone who has access to the Internet can watch it freely, saving the expenditure on purchasing a newly published translated book that could be affordable probably only to a small number of people.

In brief, the open course translation activity, which presents some features distinct from those of the conventional one, has exerted a lot of influence on translation. Moreover, since the open course translation activity remains in full swing at present, its influence is yet to be further observed and explored.

## V. CONCLUSION

The Chinese translation of open courses began in 2003, and in less than two years from the beginning of 2010 to October 2011, more than 1500 lectures of 131 courses were translated, forming a boom of translation. Given the fact that open course translation not only presents new features different from the conventional translation, but also imports advanced European and American educational resources into China, it is not only necessary but also worthwhile for us to carry out further research on it.

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