

# Translating humorous videos on social media: meaning-making in a shared culture

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**Abstract.** This paper focuses on the practices by amateur subtitlers who translate and disseminate foreign humorous videos on social media, with particular attention on the meaning-making process involving raw material selection, subtitling, reception and interaction within the online community. Drawing on relevance theory, this paper proposes that meaning-making in social media environment is achieved by both subtitlers and viewers who jointly construct a mutual cognitive environment containing shared cultural information. To verify this hypothesis, it selects 10 pieces of humorous videos and collects the viewer comments from weibo to analyze how subtitlers manage to convey the humorous meaning and how viewers respond to the subtitled content and negotiate meaning to build a shared culture. Overall, this paper contributes to the emerging research focus on the participatory consumption and reception of translated audiovisual texts in the digital era.

## 1. Introduction

In the context of continuing technology revolution, ordinary people are engaging further in the public culture involving in the production, consumption and circulation of the citizen media content. Amateur subtitling, as a prominent part of this globally emerging phenomenon, has aroused widely scholarship attention as discussed by Pérez-González (2014) under the cybercultures[1]. Amateur subtitlers, known as fansubbers (abbreviation for fan subtitlers) refer to individuals or groups who voluntarily translate audiovisual texts to pursue individual interests and build ties with networked like-minded people. In today's globalized online spaces, they play a crucial role in the raw material selecting, linguistic translating, and also cultural introducing (Zhang & Cassany, 2019)[2].

What gain parallel development is the dissemination of humorous videos across the borders. This is particularly true in the post-pandemic times when people resort to social media to release anxieties and distress. As humor is quite subjective and cultural-specific, investigation on its successful transfer can be of significance to the research of pop culture.

Another trend is the transformation of individual viewership into a more 'participatory' (Jenkins 2006: 41) and interactive experience, thanks to the affordance of synthesising technologies like commenting system[3]. As Pérez-González(2019) pointed out, such participatory consumption and reception of the media content opens a new revenue for Translation Studies (TS)[4].

Against the backdrop, this study examines the dissemination of translated humorous videos on social media in Chinese context. Specifically, by drawing on

relevance theory, it aims to explore how these videos gain viral through the subtitlers' selection of raw materials and translation strategies and how viewers receive the translated content and participate in the interpretation and reception, attempting to map the meaning-making across the whole process.

## 2. Humor translation in digital era

As a universal tactic, humor and its translation have been well discussed within translation studies, including audiovisual translation (AVT). For instances, Chiaro (2008) considers it as a tricky work due to the inextricably interwoven cultural and linguistic constraints[5]. Minutella (2014) examines the rendering of verbal humor in animated comedies, with specific focus on the translation strategies on linguistic and cultural elements such as wordplay, cultural references. Nevertheless, these studies are limited to the linguistic transfer of verbal humor[6]. Another vein of studies thus emerges which attempts to analyze visually-verbally expressed humor in audiovisual texts through semiotic approaches (Chen & Wang 2020)[7]. However, these studies mainly focus on the professional translation and still aim to address the linguistic problems.

With the emerging of amateur translation, a body of scholars have explored the translation by fansubbing groups (known as 'zimuzu' in China) through case study, including humorous audiovisual texts. For example, Xiu-xing (2015) compares the subtitling strategies in U.S. sitcoms by a famous fansubbing group with professional ones[8].

Still, despite of the abundant studies on humor translation, little attention has been drawn on the

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subtitling practices by amateur individuals on social media who have a large body of followers and exert a growing influence. In addition, even less studies have examined how the meaning-making process is achieved and the intended meaning is received and shared within the online community, especially in terms of the humorous elements which usually contain more cultural barriers.

### 3. Meaning-making in a shred culture: a relevance perspective

Meaning, as Dicerto, Sara.(2017) states, “comes to us in all forms at all times” and can be conveyed in both verbal (utterance) and non-verbal (body languages, images, sounds) modes[9]. Human communication is featured with the expression and recognition of intended meanings(Grice, 1989)[10]. That is, the communication process always involves both what the speaker means and how the receiver interprets and accepts. Meaning-making, in this sense, can be understood as a process deriving from the speakers’ intention to the viewers’ interpretation and reception.

As a cognitive linguistics theory, Sperber & Wilson’s (1986, henceforth S&W) Relevance Theory (RT) is of value to account for the subtitlers’ intention and viewer’s interpretation and reception in social media environment[11]. Basically, RT conceptualizes human cognition as relevance-oriented, that is, receivers identify speaker’s intention through inferential activities and selection of the optimal relevant interpretation (*ibid*). As part of the interpretive activity, contextual information is generally required which is retrieved from what S&W (1986:39) termed as the “cognitive environment”, encompassing all facts and manifest assumptions of the world that the receiver is capable of entertaining mentally. To guarantee the success of communication, a mutual cognitive environment is necessary which contains the information that is manifest to all the interlocutors.

In social media environment, subtitlers, as the raw material selector and linguistic translator, usually have the intention to arouse wider attention for personal purposes. To this end, they should predict viewers’ existing cognitive environment as the basis of material selection. In the translation process, they should identify the potential knowledge gap of viewers and adopt multiple strategies to fulfill the gaps, thus building a mutual cognitive environment covering the information and knowledge manifest to all actors involved. This environment can be understood as a “shared culture”, namely a culture shared by collective communities as Adami and Pinto (2019) proposed[12]. Furthermore, the open environment can foster interaction and knowledge sharing within the community.

The meaning-making process thus can be described as follows: On the one hand, the subtitlers will firstly predict the cognitive environment of viewers, then try to select raw materials containing information and knowledge manifest to most of their target viewers and seek to transfer the message effectively. When they

found the information is inaccessible in viewers’ cognitive environment, creative translation strategies can be adopted to ensure the reception of the message conveyed. On the other hand, viewers are attracted by the videos for the topics. When watching the videos, they retrieve the meaning based on the subtitles combined with the knowledge stored in their cognitive environment. However, in some cases, the subtitlers may fail to convey the message correctly or the knowledge is limited to certain groups, viewers with expertise of linguistics or specific knowledge can actively participate in the discussion or problem-solving activities to make the knowledge manifest to peers.

In a nutshell, this study claims that, meaning-making in social media environment is achieved by all actors involved who jointly construct a mutual cognitive environment or a “shared culture”.

### 4. Data and Methodology

The data was collected from weibo, a well-known social media platform in China. After a careful viewing and observation, a purposive sampling method based on relevance and popularity was used. Finally, 10 pieces of short videos were selected from 5 reputed translation bloggers who are reputed for subtitling humorous videos. Case study and descriptive analysis are the main methods to elaborate the practices of bloggers in terms of the material selection and rendering as well as the interaction within the online community.

### 5. Results

#### 5.1. Raw Material selection

The information of the selected raw materials are shown below:

**Table 1.** Basic information of the selected videos

No.	Topics	Genre	Sources	Blogger
1	Prank (relationship)	self-made	YouTube	B
2	Culture (Custom)	self-made	Weibo: Baidehan	D
3	World Cup	Talk show	Ticktok:the daily show	C
4	Life & work (rent & work attitude)	stand-up comedy	Sheng Wang	C
5	Covid	Ads	YouTube: SNL	A
6	Family (marriage)	self-made	Ticktok:Eric Reborts	A
7	Culture (accent)	self-made	Ticktok: benguez	E
8	Life & work (work attitude)	self-made	Ticktok: veggieboy111	D
9	Individual issue (appearance & tax)	stand-up comedy	Tom Thakkar	D
10	Life style (Selfile)	stand-up comedy	Erica Rhodes	C

**Table 2.** Basic information of the bloggers/subtitlers

No.	Blogger	Followers	Verified tag	Ranges
A	YouTube Selected	21.32million	humorous, subtitler	humorous short fromYouTube
B	baozangdabiaoage	12.326million	humorous, subtitler	foreign and domestic humorous videos
C	zimushaonv	2.278million	film, subtitler	film, reality show, stand-up comedy
D	tianwangxiaotianwang	1.861million	humorous, subtitler	humorous videos from Youtube, Ticktok,etc.;
E	internet-garon-pdf	1.778million	subtitler	stand-up comedy humorous videos from Youtube, Ticktok,etc.

To ensure the diversification of sample sources, the bloggers were selected based on both the influence ranking of humor and subtitler tag verified by weibo. As

illustrated in table 1, totally five bloggers were identified with two of them having over 10 million followers and the other three having over 1 million followers. The videos they choose to translate range from humorous short videos from YouTube, Ticktok, etc. to stand-up comedy or humorous clips from certain films or reality show, covering a wide span of topics.

According to table 2, it is found that the topics of the selected videos are generally related to people's daily life, such as culture, life, work, individual or family issue, relationship or marriage and also the latest happenings (World Cup). The genre represents the types of original videos, such as self-created videos by users in YouTube or Ticktok, clips of stand-up comedy or talk shows, or ads for comedy. This suggests that the sources of humorous videos are rather varied and both individual citizens or comedians and institutions are engaging in the production and dissemination.

From a relevance perspective, the bloggers' decision-making of the selection largely relies on the relevance of the topics. That is, bloggers will firstly predict viewers' existing cognitive environment and tend to select those with information that are manifest to most of viewers' cognitive environment so that achieve the best communication effect. Specifically, the videos cover a range of topics as described above, and all of these topics are highly relevant to people's daily life. For example, video 1 is about "Fake fall in front of my boyfriend", which is a rather popular topic gaining viral on YouTube and such kind of prank between boy/girlfriend can be easily understood in Chinese culture. Similarly, video 4 is a clip of stand-up comedy in which the comedian talks about his experience in life and work, complaining about the high rents, and ironically sharing how he wastes papers in work. So when the bloggers make the decision of what to translate, these kinds of videos containing elements manifest to many viewers' cognition would be their priority.

## 5.2.Subtitling

Without the constraints in professional practice, amateur subtitlers enjoy more flexibility and usually adopt more bold and innovative strategies (Pérez-González, 2014). Similarly, the bloggers also demonstrate diversity and creativity in subtitling characteristics and strategies.

### 5.2.1.Characteristics

The bloggers tend to adopt personalized style in the subtitles in terms of font, size, color, etc.



**Fig. 1** Screenshot of subtitles by tianwangxiaotianwang  
 ST: (Yellow) In UK, what we never do when speaking  
 TT:(Yellow) 在英国我们从不说话的时候..

ST: (Red) Chinese-style spoof of British Manners  
 TT:(Red) 中式恶搞英式礼仪

As shown in the figure, the subtitler highlight the subtitles by using unique color and font and also larger size. Based on the RT, this can be described as subtitlers' intention to stress words or sentences that viewers can relate to as so to fulfill the intended aim.

### 5.2.2.Strategies

Moreover, they also adopt multiple strategies to better facilitate viewers' comprehension and reception of the humor embedded in the video.

**(1)Explicit annotation:** One common strategy that subtitlers use is pop-up annotation which is mainly for clarifying something in blur or implicit. The cases are shown below:



**Fig. 2** Screenshot of subtitles by internet-garcon-pdf  
 ST: (top) Secret for Learning French or Spanish  
 TT: (top) 学习法语焊西语的秘密  
 ST: (middle) Learning...  
 TT: (middle) 以学习...  
 ST: (bottom)Focus  
 TT:(bottom) 专注 (zhuān zhù)

**Case 1 (Fig. 2):** In this example, the two speakers (one French and one Spanish guy) are sharing their language learning skills. As they speak the word "Focus", their strong accents make the word hard to be distinguished, the subtitler then use pop-up annotations to emphasize the correct word and also add Chinese Pinyin (zhuān zhù; phonetic system) which further stress the correct pronunciation. The humorous effect is thus achieved by the contrast of the pronunciation of the speaker and the explicit annotation. From RT perspective, the subtitler use information shared by the public so as to achieve better communication effect.



**Fig. 3** Screenshot of subtitles by internet-garcon-pdf  
 ST: This makes me in a pickle  
 TT: 这让我有点难堪  
 ST: which means in a crisis  
 TT: 就是...“存在危机”的意思  
 ST: but I do love pickles  
 TT: 不过我很爱腌黄瓜

**Case 2** (Fig. 3): In this example, when translating the pun “pickle”, the subtitler adds the English word and phrases to make the meaning explicit and help viewer better comprehend it. In this way, the viewer can access their knowledge of puns and finally receive the embedded humor.

**Case 3** (Fig. 4): In the video about the prank (fake fall in front of boyfriend), the subtitler adds extra description of the implicit reaction and mental thoughts of the boy. What makes the video even much funnier is the repetitive use of punctuation “?” and “。” which is a common usage in the Internet context to express the feeling of confusion and speechless. As such usage is manifest to Chinese netizens, the subtitles thus can achieve better amusing effect.



**Fig.4** Screenshot of subtitles by baozangdabiao

ST:(top)

TT:(top) ? ? ? ? ?

ST:(middle)

TT:(middle) 。 。 。 。 。

ST:(bottom) Baby, it's too obvious. It's fake fall

TT:(bottom) (无动于衷) 太假了宝贝，一看就是假摔

**(2) Recreating and Rewriting:** The subtitlers also frequently adopt rewriting and recreating strategies when dealing with the intention to make fun.

**Case 4** (Fig. 2): In the case shown in Fig. 2, the subtitler translates the word “or” (“或”huo in Pinyin) in the title into “焊”(han in pinyin) as “han” sounds like the accent version of “huo”, which echos to the theme of accent and then enlarge the amusing effect.



**Fig. 5** Screenshot of subtitles by YouTube Selected

ST:Vanks, Vovid

TT: 听我说靴靴你 Vovid

**Case 5** (Fig 5): In this case, the source text is meant to describe how the speaker who is a infected patient but shows her gratitude to Covid with snuffle, thus making the words sounds like “Vanks, Vovid”. The subtitler rewrites and recreate the text by translating “Vanks” into “靴靴你” which sounds like “谢谢你”(Thanks) in Chinese and also using the sentence“听我说谢谢

你”(Listen to me, and thanks) which is a pop sentence used in respond to something unpleasant among Chinese nitzens. In this way, the ironic meaning of the original text can be better transferred.

### 5.3.Reception and interaction

**Table 3.** Reception Information

No.	views	Likes	Forwards	Comments
1	4,930,000	19,000	2048	2453
2	1,200,000	18,000	975	261
3	1,130,000	15,000	2831	404
4	515,000	4,379	1608	150
5	430,000	2,144	1239	227
6	350,000	2,143	895	129
7	287,000	11,000	431	301
8	268,000	6,443	492	400
9	193,000	739	126	78
10	173,000	2,003	355	14

The interfaces like commenting system, forwards and likes on social media can encourage people to engage with the content or peers, which thus can be considered to be rating metrics of the popularity of the content. As shown in the above table, these videos have received much attention and can to some extent demonstrate the general quality of the translated video.

To further explore the viewers’ reception of humor, the interaction in the comment section are observed and analyzed. The categorization of the interaction activities and examples (screenshots selected and captured by the author) are illustrated below:

**(1)Response to the content and subtitler:** Some viewers shows their direct response to the translated content by commenting “哈哈”(“HaHa”), emojis,“好笑”(That's hilarious/funny”) or showing gratitude or praise to the subtitler as shown in Fig. 6.

**Example 1.**

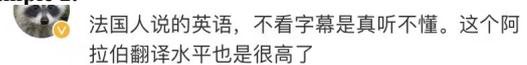


**Fig. 6** Screenshot from the comment section of video 2

TT: HaHaHaHa. Ms Wang(the subtitler) is talented!

**(2)Discussion on the content:** Some viewers discuss on the content *per se*. As shown in Example 2, the viewer discussed the content in the video about an interpreter in World Cup.

**Example 2.**



**Fig. 7** Screenshot from the comment section of video 1

TT: The English spoken by French is hard to comprehend without reference to the subtitles. The proficiency of this Arabic interpreter is rather high.

**(3)Experience sharing:** Some viewers share personal experience related to the topics. In example 3, the viewer comments on the video about how British people reject chicken foot by sharing his similar experience.

**Example 3.**



**Fig. 8** Screenshot from the comment section of video 2

TT: When I treat my British friend, the first thing they say is no head no foot no gut.

**(4)Knowledge sharing:** Some viewers with higher language proficiency or professional knowledge also actively engage in sharing their understanding of the source text and may point out the wrong translation or something implicit. For example, in video 9, the subtitler translate “write off” into “写信”(writing letter) and was corrected by a viewer who is a financial professional.

**Example 4.**



**Fig. 9** Screenshot from the comment section of video 9  
*TT: (Viewer)It seems that write off means tax reduction.*

*(Subtitler) Got it.Hahahaha.*

**Example 5.**



**Fig. 10** Screenshot from the comment section of video 4  
*TT: (Viewer 1) People use the cloud, I use tree. Hhhhhh.*

*(Viewer 2)What’s the meaning of this sentence? I don’t understand.*

*(Viewer1) Cloud refers to cloud backup while trees mean he use print papers to backup.”*

*(View 2) Many thanks! I got it!”*

Similarly, in video 4 the comedian said, “People use the cloud, I use tree.” This is meant to describe how he wastes print paper when working, in contrast with his frugal life. As the subtitler did not translate the implicit meaning, then some viewers discuss and solve the problem.

## 6.Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the RT and results, it is verified that in social media environment, the meaning-making is achieved by joint endeavors of both subtitlers (bloggers) and viewers through the whole translation and reception process. Specifically, when selecting the raw material, the bloggers would firstly predict the existing cognitive environment of the target viewers, and choose topics that most of the viewers can relate to. Then in the rendering process, they would, based on their prediction, adopt flexible strategies such as annotation, rewriting or recreating to fulfill knowledge gaps of viewers so as to maximize the humorous effect. In the reception phase, viewers would react to the translated content and some may engage in the discussion of the content *per se*, sharing their personal experience, or even involving in the knowledge sharing and problem-solving activities. In this way, a mutual cognitive environment or a ‘shared culture’ can be constructed by all the members involved.

Overall, this study can contribute to the growing research focus on participatory consumption and reception of translated audiovisual texts. Firstly, its proposal of “meaning-making in a shared culture” can be of theoretical value to the translation research in digital environment. It also conducts a verification study to provide convincing evidences, thus enriching the research in this vein. In addition, its discussion on humor transfer strategies and interaction within online community can also bring practical implications to stakeholders in other related industries such as film or ads, especially those who tend to utilize humorous elements and social media for propaganda.

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