
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Motivation for User-Generated Translation on Chinese Online Video Platform

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| ABSTRACT

This article presents a socio-cultural study of user-generated translation (UGT), which is increasingly gaining momentum on Chinese social media platforms and presents itself as a subculture in online communities. Using Bilibili.com as the test-ground of study, this article designs an inclusive questionnaire and conducts sociological and psychological analysis on the motivation for UGT by 17 uploaders that are selected based on their different influence and translation field. The study finds that at least six categories of motivation contribute to these user-translators' good-will practice, both altruistically and utilitarianly. We believe our methodology and findings can pave the way for further investigation into the complexities and nature of this new type of audio-visual translation by grass-roots in a digital era and participatory culture.

| KEYWORDS

User-generated translation (UGT); motivation; qualitative research; China's Bilibili

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1. Introduction

The discipline of Translation Studies (TS) is on an ever-changing and profound evolution in recent decades in response to the rapid development of globalization and the adjacent research fields. By capitalizing on multiple interdisciplinary approaches, methodologies and research frameworks from sociology, communication studies, linguistics and cultural studies, it has undergone a flurry of "turns" stretching from "cultural turn" (Basnett and Lefevere, 1990), "sociological turn" (Wolf and Fukari, 2007), to the more recent "technological turn" (Cronin, 2010; Jiménez-Crespo, 2020) and "cognitive turn". Even though these "turns" were always overlapped in any historical period, it cannot be denied that in recent years, technological development is changing TS and translation practice to the core at an unprecedented pace, especially with the emergence of social media and online video platforms. New forms of translations and translation practices catalyzed by information technology and globalization have called into question the prevalent understanding towards the definition of translation and translator and foregrounded the question of how to investigate these new phenomena and what new trends they may bring to TS. Moreover, although translator studies and translation process studies have come to force and taken on diverse forms in recent years, most of them have focused on literary translation while little attention has been paid to the "informal" translation practices in a broader sense, especially those mediated by the online social media platform. In this context, the present study attempts to delve into the user-generated translation (UGT) of popular foreign videos on Bilibili, a Chinese trending cultural community and video-sharing platform featuring ACG (anime, comic and game), to elucidate the impact of digital innovation in reconceptualizing the definition of translation practice and investigate the motivation, category and mechanism of UGT in cyberspace.

2. Research Background

Over the last decade, netizens' interactions on social media have been increasingly showing multimodal styles. In the very beginning, the user-generated contents were typically through messaging, a small-circle textual communication model which was limited to more familiar friends. Even among unfamiliar netizens, this kind of interaction was often superficial and difficult to form

stable cyber connectivity. However, with the Internet environment gradually giving shape to our new everyday routines, novel ways of engaging in social media enable new social construction of reality and facilitate new forms of knowledge exchange (Song, 2010, p. 251). As the virtual world with multimodal user-generated content goes beyond geographical and spiritual borders, it engenders broader communicative contacts, contributing to a rethinking of what constitutes interlingual and audio-visual translation. With the advance of digital technology and the vogue for social media platforms in the twenty-first century, translation activity benefits from the synergy and the nature of this socio-cultural practice were reshaped (Gambier, 2016, p. 892). In a networked era, the rise of “participatory culture” (Jenkins et al., 2015) has contributed to a myriad of translations produced by non-professional citizens in cyberspace, which is of increasing interest to translation scholars. Various terms have been proposed to refer to this idiosyncratic translation practice, such as user-generated translation (O’Hagan, 2009, 2016; Krasnopeyeva, 2018), fansubbing (Wongseree, 2019), volunteer translation (Kang and Hong, 2020; Olohan, 2014), grassroots translation (Yang, 2019) and amateur translation (Izwaini, 2012; Lu, 2019; Li, 2019), with slight differences of meaning and context between each other. In 2019, Gernot Hebenstreit (2019) advocated the umbrella term “social-media-driven translation” to encapsulate all the above-mentioned concepts. It is worth noting that Miguel Jiménez-Crespo (2017) proposes the term “translation crowdsourcing” or “online collaborative translation” to focalize the collaboration among translators as the nature of translation in online spheres. Later, Alfer (2017) coins the term “translaboration”, which regards all online translation practices as intrinsically collaborative endeavours since, dialectically, it involves the imbrication of both textual and agentive forces (Cordingley and Manning, 2017). It cannot be denied that collaboration constitutes an imperative feature of online translation, and the convergence of translation and collaboration serves as a widely interested topic. However, “translation practices involving the Internet crowd are still an emerging phenomenon with even its label yet to be agreed upon” (O’Hagan, 2011, pp. 15-16), which indicates a dearth of views from the TS perspective. In this context, we argue that UGT carried out on online video platforms are not necessarily collaborative. In fact, most of them shall be ascribed to individual and voluntary endeavours, and the desire for attention capital can account for the motivation of UGT. Specifically, by drawing on the concept of Jenkins et al. (2015) and O’Hagan (2009), we define the research object in the present study as “participatory user-generated translation in the cyber culture” so as to bring to the fore the participatory and digital ecology of this ad hoc translation phenomenon.

3. Motivation for UGT on Bilibili

Like YouTube, Bilibili is a popular social media community for content creators and an online video-sharing platform offering rewards to talents. Thus, an in-depth investigating into the internal operating logic of Bilibili is conducive to the understanding of the user-translators’ motivation for UGT. Founded in 2009, Bilibili quickly rose to fame for its diverse content, creative community and strong presence among young internet users, becoming one of the leading online platforms for user-generated content in China. One of Bilibili’s defining features is the unique “bullet comments”, which allow users to post real-time comments that scroll across the screen as the video plays, fostering a sense of community and friendship among viewers. In terms of the video category, Bilibili shifted from its original ACG content to a wider scope, including animations, games, music, movies, technology, lifestyles and much more. In Bilibili, the source of video can be divided into *zizhi* (self-made) and *banyun* (re-upload), though the divergence is not clear-cut in some cases. Uploaders (“Upers” in Internet slang) with talented video content are supported and empowered through Bilibili’s “Creative Incentive Program”, an initiative designed to encourage creators and reward their original contribution to the community. Key features of the “Creative Incentive Program” include:

(1) Rewarding originality

The program focuses on promoting original content and gives priority to creators who produce unique and fresh ideas. Creators are encouraged to explore new themes, formats and styles that cater to Bilibili’s diverse and passionate audience.

(2) Commercialization opportunities

Content creators who participate in the program have access to various monetization options, such as advertisement revenue sharing, virtual gifting and premium membership. This enables creators to earn a sustainable income from their works, encouraging them to invest more time and effort into their creative pursuits.

(3) Quality assessment

Bilibili employs a comprehensive quality assessment process to ensure that only deserving creators receive incentives. The platform evaluates factors like engagement viewer feedback and production standards to determine the eligibility of creators for program benefits.

(4) Community recognition

Through the “Creative Incentive Program”, Bilibili aims to create a sense of recognition and appreciation within its community. Creators who excel in their content creation efforts receive an acknowledgement from both the platform and their dedicated fan base, fostering a positive and supportive environment.

(5) Skill development and support

Bilibili provides resources, workshops and educational materials to help creators improve their skills and enhance the quality of their content. The platform believes in nurturing talent and empowering creators to reach their full potential.

However, the content of UGT on Bilibili is in a very awkward situation. Firstly, these types of translated videos are often downloaded and re-edited from websites like YouTube, which are strictly blocked within China, indicating the translators' illegal access to foreign websites and poses a risk to the legitimacy of these translated video. Secondly, this type of video is explicitly regulated as "unauthorized translation subtitles added by oneself do not belong to the 'self-made' category" (Bilibili, 2023) when submitted. UGT on Bilibili is thus an idiosyncratic translation type in China since it falls into a gray area, and its operational mode on Bilibili needs to be clarified, which also brings us several questions: Who is conducting these translations? Why do they choose to translate on Bilibili? And what kind of translation work are they engaged in? In what follows, we will search for some video uploaders of translated content and conduct an investigation regarding these questions.

The increasingly advanced information technology has brought convenience to video platform regulatory departments and, at the same time, has enabled video content creators to easily participate in content creation, distribution and consumption; and circumvent barriers imposed by the government. Just as Wang and Zhang (2017, p. 305) observed, it is often the case that "the very same technologies harnessed for political and ideological control may be utilized by audiences to gain freedom from state domination". In this respect, these citizens act not only as passive and independent consumers but also active and reciprocal producers or prosumers, who are very familiar with the subjects they translate, the translation strategies they resort to, and, more importantly, they are highly acquainted with the audience of the videos because they are people who share common interests. So why did they choose to conduct UGT?

First, we searched for keywords such as "translation", "Chinese-English subtitle", and others on Bilibili to identify target videos and accounts. The collected data covered various genres of video translations, and the follower counts of the accounts ranged from thousands to millions, basically representing the UGT group on Bilibili. To investigate the translation practices of this community, we designed a questionnaire¹ focusing on topics such as "gender", "language learning background", "work background", "translation language", "translation motivation", "content selection", "self-identification", "willingness for adding ID in videos", "most satisfying work", "translation tools", "team collaboration" and "views on 'Creative Incentive Program'". We distributed this questionnaire to 35 selected Upers and received 17 completed responses (anonymous or non-anonymous).

This investigation of stated user-translators' profiles focused on the statement of translation motivation in the fifth question as observable and measurable indicators. Having examined and filtered the collected questionnaire, we noticed that these data serve different functions in comparison to the Upers' voluntary self-presentation, as in the video introduction and the pre-set automatic reply while subscribing. To be specific, as passive respondents, the participants fill the blank with vigilance for researchers. When designing their own personal or channel portrait, they make creative and useful decisions about the information they wish to impart to the viewers so as to attract the attention of potential fans. That is to say, there are gaps between the real motivation and displayed motivation for UGT. In addition, although our selected data are representative of different types and influences of UGT on Bilibili, 17 entries of the questionnaire cannot be considered sufficient in covering all possible motivations. So, the aim of this study is not to delve into the detailed mechanism of UGT on Bilibili but rather unveil the basic logic of user-translators' motivation and video type.

Table 1. Profile of translators of UGT on Bilibili (as of July 20, 2023)

Upers' ID	Follower count	Target language	Field	Motivation for UGT
Brother Kan's View on English (侃哥侃英语)	1,464,397	English Chinese	Translation criticism	Spreading happiness and knowledge
Stubborn Daniel (固执的 Daniel)	679,932	English Chinese	Short video translation	Spreading happiness and knowledge
Sincere Translation from KB (KB 诚译)	310,047	English Chinese	Short video translation	Improving translation skills
Rogue Tears and Sighs (胭脂 泪叹)	114,242	English Chinese	Talk show translation	Acquiring satisfaction by helping others
GAGATalk	16,579	English Chinese	Academic translation	Spreading happiness and knowledge
Translation Group of Hiddleston (抖森翻译军团)	74,106	English Chinese	Figure translation	Gaining a sense of collective belonging on the Internet

Kitten Translation Team (猫猫翻译组)	69,947	English Chinese	Video game translation	Spreading happiness and knowledge
iFixit Chinese Translation Site (iFixit中文翻译站)	51,205	English Chinese	Technology translation	Acquiring satisfaction by helping others
Translation Agency of YouTube Comment (油管评论翻译社)	9,361	English Chinese	YouTube comment translation	Supplementing life as a side job
Muffin Translation Team (松饼译制组)	212,149	English Chinese	Talk show translation	Acquiring satisfaction by helping others
Qiantang 19 (钱塘19)	2,852	English Chinese	Sports translation	Experiencing the life of professional translators
RM Translation Team (RM字幕组)	47,897	English Chinese	Sports translation	Gaining a sense of collective belonging on the Internet
Big-Daddy-Yi	2,476	English Chinese	Academic translation	Improving translation skills
The Home of Documentary Translation Team (纪录片之家字幕组)	1,270,482	English Chinese	Documentary translation	Supplementing life as a side job
Youzimu Translation Team(柚子木字幕组)	3,638,890	English Chinese	Academic translation	Spreading happiness and knowledge
Translator of YouTube Comments (油管评论翻译员)	6,487	English Chinese	YouTube comment translation	Supplementing life as a side job
Guidelines for breaking free from the sea of suffering (脱离苦海综合指南)	21,694	English Chinese	Academic translation	Experiencing the life of professional translators

Following a meticulous examination of the collected entries and thorough observation of the translators’ attached statements in their personal space and videos, all vocal or implied motivations for UGT were recorded and classified (as shown in Table 1). Through a comparison of these qualitative data, motivations were encapsulated into six categories: (1) spreading happiness and knowledge; (2) supplementing life as a side job; (3) improving translation skills; (4) acquiring satisfaction by helping others; (5) gaining a sense of collective belonging on the internet; and (6) experiencing the life of professional translators. In what follows, a preliminary account of these categories and their properties is provided.

The first factor contributing to UGT practice on Bilibili is the desire to spread happiness and knowledge to others. The starting point is that translators gain happiness or knowledge while watching the original video, and they want to share this mental pleasure with other people who are inaccessible to this pleasure due to technological and linguistic restrictions. With the focus on knowledge, inspiration or entertainment, this motive can be considered as a wish to reach global cultural equality, which, therefore, shall be perceived as altruistic in the purest sense. In this respect, sharing is seen as the mission of translators who stay committed to a lofty pursuit for the commonwealth of spirit if we extend beyond the scope of sharing ideas. The goal of delivering well-being to others through contributions to UGT on Bilibili is also articulatory in the translators’ statements, though this motivation varies in different individuals. As a regional company based in China, Bilibili’s operation is centered on cultural products and communication that stay within the Chinese geographical and cultural borders. That’s why almost all Upers in Bilibili are Chinese, and their target language is Chinese. In this respect, sharing on Bilibili is altruistic in a local and Sino-centric sense.



Figure 1. The translator’s personal space profile and his nametag (“Translating popular overseas videos, follow me to gain happiness!” [my translation])

The second category of motivation is treating UGT as a side job for supplementing life or for economic capital. However, it is rarely the case that platform monetization and incentives could serve subsistence if the Upers merely upload translated videos. First of all, as mentioned before, unauthorized subtitle translations are not considered “self-made”, which means most of UGTs on Bilibili are *为爱发电 yongai fadian* (do it out of love). If the Upers want to make their effort lucrative, they need to utilize their resources accumulated through translating and morph into a self-media practitioner. This is what one of the Upers we investigated has undergone throughout his career. Enjoying more than one million fans and two hundred million view counts, “Brother Kan’s View on English” is one of the most popular and entrepreneurial language Upers on Bilibili by making vlogs on translation criticism. He makes an appearance in every video and shares his views on translation problems in everyday life. By uploading a video that length of 2-5 minutes every two days, he can absolutely feed on the platform incentive and advertisements. Although not every translator can choose to do so due to individual personality and the agglomeration effect of online capital resources, economic rewards are still helpful to life maintenance for parts of the group.

The third motivating factor extracted from the questionnaire and observation is that of improving translation skills. Translators think they can learn from watching and translating the selected video on foreign websites. Through in-depth understanding and abundant experience of the translated material, translators become more and more familiar with the feature of the field and the penchant of their target audience, which hones their translation skills and make their videos more audience-oriented. A virtuous circle is forming when better translation skills generate greater videos. Greater videos bring about more fans, which in turn fuels translation skills. And it may be safe to assume that this category of motivation is in relation to whether the translator is a specialist or trainee. According to some accounts of mature professionals, they are more likely to translate a video to learn about the content of the material rather than translation per se.

Unlike the first factor, which features pure altruism, those user-translators who conduct UGT on Bilibili to acquire satisfaction by helping others is a type of impure altruism, or what Andreoni (1990) called “warm glow”. They get good feelings when their works receive positive feedback. As shown in Figure 2, the translator elaborates on his understanding in the comments section attached to the video. Obviously, the viewers are very interested in the knowledge conveyed in the video, and they express their gratitude towards the hard work of the translator, which booms his “warm glow” and leads to his decision of “timely completion of the entire content once this video gets considerable likes and reposts”.



Figure 2. Translator’s interaction with his viewers in the comments section

The fifth motivation stated by the translators is gaining a sense of collective belonging on the internet, especially in his cyber community or grouping. To be more specific, many write of “participating actively in the community” by making his video an interactive platform for viewers’ communication and discussion. The translator, as the content creator and administrator, occupies a very prominent position in generating topics, guiding public opinion and controlling meaningless conversations, which empowers his considerable autonomy and discretionary authority; and brings himself/herself huge attention capital. As a type of symbolic capital, attention capital can be understood as “[t]he social crediting of somebody’s earned attention” (Franck, 1999). It is a key resource of human society, especially within the online space. Many translators acclaimed that “they [fans] just want me to translate more”, which means attention capital is based on viewers’ acknowledge and can be measured by video view counts, comments and channel subscriptions. However, as mentioned before, personal resources or attention capital can hardly convert into immediate economic capital for user-translators on online platforms. Therefore, this type of motivation category can be seen as impure utilitarianism.



Figure 3. Translator’s note on the background and main content of video

The sixth category of motivation for UGT on Bilibili is experiencing the life of professional translators, though constitutes a relatively small proportion. They are either language students or engaged in non-professional language-related work. For them, working as full-time translators is not feasible. Therefore, they carry a deep desire for the sanctity of translation and engage in UGT as a grassroots and part-time practice. They are very close to professional translation in terms of standardization. Although the vast majority of translated videos do not consider themselves self-produced content and choose to upload them as non-profit reposts, they still acknowledge the source of the original video. Most of them also include the translator and translation team’s IDs and roles in the video. However, as to the quality of the translated video, it is safe to say that amateur UGT subtitling exhibited inferior quality than professional translation.

This analysis encompasses 6 categories of motives for UGT on Bilibili by grass-roots Chinese netizens. It serves as a qualitative pilot investigation into a new type of audio-visual translation on social media platforms, which is still underexplored and needs further and in-depth analysis.

4. Discussion

Bilibili has always touted itself as a knowledge-sharing website, but when it comes to the qualitative aspect of translation, it has been ambiguous. TED, on the other hand, has its own “Open Translation Project”, where English-language subtitles are provided by TED officials, and translations into other languages are produced by qualified volunteer translators. However, Bilibili appears to be quite conservative in this regard. Despite having its official translation team responsible for translating documentaries, anime, and foreign TV series, the translation quality often fails to convince viewers that it comes from an official source. Various mistranslations and awkward expressions are common, which to some extent, affects the audience’s comprehension. Furthermore, due to ideological constraints, some of the officially procured videos on Bilibili are often censored or edited, significantly impacting cultural exchange and knowledge dissemination. In this context, the translator community on Bilibili still faces many awkward situations, such as copyright issues and censorship, which make UGT on the platform an authoritatively underdefined practice, despite garnering significant attention, participation, and influence.



Figure 4. Translator's disclaimer for the legal issues of the video

It may be concluded that most of the user-translators we examined in this study developed their career and skill in translation alongside an interest in another field, such as technology, talk show, politics or economy; they treat translation as a hobby and supplementary know-how for his understanding towards the world. At the same time, the role of UGT in promoting global cultural communication in cyberspace is the broader topic of the domain of relative research. Before the mechanism of that topic is clarified, we need to get to know why grass-roots netizens contribute to UGT and what confrontation of ideas between different parties may emerge. This paper sets out to addressing the first question while calling for the panoramic mechanism of research into this new type of translation practice.

5. Conclusion

In the era of Web 2.0, the content-driven internet product model utilizes the Web as an interactive platform, with users playing a leading role in generating the content, in contrast to the traditional content generated by the employees or operators of the websites. It has also revolutionized the way in which translations are produced, distributed and consumed. Previously perceived as a professional practice, both literary translation and specialized translation were typically conducted by qualified translators with acknowledged training and practical experience and considerable social capital. However, a new type of grass-roots translation by users of social media emerges as a trend and attracts the interest of translation scholars. In this context, the present paper focuses on the motivation for UGT on a Chinese popular video platform that features cultural products in an attempt to delve into the preliminary question as to what triggers those user-translators' practice through questionnaires. This research topic merits a systematic exploration for a number of reasons. First, as a type of audio-visual translation by non-professionals, UGT offers an alternative to professional subtitling that dominates the AVT market and poses a great opportunity for rethinking the nature of translation and translator in a time of globalization and digitalization. Second, the paper's focus on motivation for good-will translation practice expands the scope of translation studies to a field that interacts with more in-depth sociological, economic and psychological approaches, which is in line with the trending calls for interdisciplinary research within translation studies (Tymoczko, 2014; Blumczynski, 2016; Gambier and van Doorslaer, 2016). It may serve as a pilot study on the panoramic understanding of UGT in cyberspace. There are more subtle features of this underexplored domain, such as technological intervention, online collaboration, censorship and viewers' reception, that impact the "mass amateurisation" (Garcia, 2010). Further explorations into these questions are needed to supplement AVT and grass-roots translation.

Note

1. See <https://www.wjx.cn/vm/e9TRPAY.aspx>

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