Translating the K-wave: A Greater Discursive View

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Abstract

The Korean Wave or K-wave is often examined as a globally dispersed yet rapidly growing field of cultural consumption. When studying this phenomenon, the question of how the audience is reached despite cultural distances, different languages, and foreign sensibilities is crucial, as the meanings that the audience receives explain why the K-wave "sticks," sometimes even through immersive empathy and sustained self-identification. To this end, studies have observed fan-driven community translation efforts and the meanings that K-wave content holds for core fans. I shift this familiar focus slightly by asking the question "What does translation do to K-wave content in reverse?" This approach takes the discursive process of localization and its actors into account. This article is a first step towards proposing that studying meanings before and after translation is an overlooked theoretical building block for explaining the spread of the K-wave. Doing so can provide a deeper understanding of the successes and failures of exported cultural content and yields a higher level of control over translation outcomes, which have been subject to more moral hazard than would be ideal.

Keywords: Hallyu (K-wave), translation, localization, subtitling, webtoon, discursive institutionalism

1. Introduction

This paper reframes translation from a conduit to a discursive mechanism in the Korean wave (hereafter K-wave), arguing that localization choices feed back into source-side meanings over time. The spread of the Korean Wave is intertwined with translation, which is as essential as it is overlooked by most research. With few exceptions, aside from research that focuses on fan community dynamics of networked translations and near-instant feedback from fellow fans, translation in the K-wave is typically imagined as a purely unidirectional process from bilingual content translators towards the target audience.

While this is a rigid and typical model of the translation of cultural works, the K-wave as a wide-spreading cultural supply and demand is characterized as globalized, fragmented, and culturally hybridizing. This also recalibrates how we think about translation, an essential enabler of the phenomenon. In this vein, this article asks whether the unique and well-studied traits of the K-wave cause gradual changes in the source content over time.

To trace this mechanism, I spotlight the mundane work within the professional and/or fan community-driven system of K-content translation that can lead to this outcome. Positing a translating realm and a receiving audience realm, which are connected through discursive processes, I strive to theorize the multi-levelled actors and processes in this kind of setting. By doing so, the goal is to define a concept stronger than translation and even localization, which helps to encapsulate the translation mechanisms of the K-wave, including the contextual effects that relate to the K-content's medium and target audiences, as well as the "why and how" of their successful (or unsuccessful) reception. At the moment, reciprocal "translational" processes in the K-wave seem to be most prevalent in K-pop, among all K-wave domains. This mechanism of change through translation is not only propelled by avid fan labor, but through the updating of ideas through the discursive process of translation and localization. In this sense, one future question is whether K-pop is a unique case or merely a first case of many.

While cultural hybridity approaches explain what content travels, and sociological translation perspectives explain where norms originate, this discursive-institutionalist lens centers on how translation legitimacy develops across pipelines over time.

2. Varieties of Translations and Impact on Audience

Prior work on hybridity, fansubbing, and platformized circulation explains diffusion; I extract from these strands the missing mechanism of *translation-as-institution*. A recent study argues that K-wave research tends to focus on global circulation and consumption (usually with a focus on transnational fanbases), neglecting the production system and creative labor in Korea.[1] While their study is geared toward labor conditions, translation is another theoretically neglected factor essential to the K-wave, one that is also more closely situated on the Korean side of producing the content and is a required step before the audience's reception. This applies especially when the translations are paid professional jobs rather than unpaid fan-community-based efforts. While the latter kind of fan labor has been highlighted as one factor in the success of K-wave (especially K-pop) content, the

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Yun Jin Nam and Aznur Aisyah, 'K-Pop V Fansubs, V LIVE and NAVER Dictionary: Fansubbers' Synergy in Minimising Language Barriers', *3L: The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies* Vol 23, no. 4 (2017): 112–27.

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Hyejeong Ahn and Jieun Kiaer, 'Pop Culture Words: How Can K-Wave Turn Korean Words into Global, Translingual Words?', *English Today* 37, no. 3 (2021): 178–87, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078420000292.

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Hyejeong Ahn and Jieun Kiaer, 'Translingual English Words of Korean Origin and beyond: Skinship, Fighting, Chimaek', *Asian Englishes* 26, no. 1 (2024): 69–83, https://doi.org/10.1080/13488678.2023.2216866.

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Brittany Khedun-Burgoine and Jieun Kiaer, *Korean Wave in World Englishes: The Linguistic Impact of Korea's Popular Culture* (Routledge, 2022), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429200410.

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Saadia Izzeldin Malik, *The Korean Wave (Hallyu) and Its Cultural Translation by Fans in Qatar*, 2019, 5736–5738.

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Jieun Kiaer et al., *The K-Wave On-Screen: In Words and Objects* (Taylor & Francis, 2023).

former has not, even though professional (i.e., paid) translations can either heighten or decimate the artistic or entertainment value of content. Hence, professional translation is surely one part of explaining the K-wave.

The rapid emergence of AI-assisted translation workflows further complicates these dynamics. Machine translation provides faster throughput but often produces "literal-but-legible" defaults that miss cultural nuance, requiring human revisers to act as discursive correctives for tone and appropriateness. This acceleration of feedback loops between audience response and upstream choices may intensify the recursive effects described in this framework.

As an intrinsic part of the K-wave, translation has affected the K-wave industry and the audience's culture in various ways. In relations to developments in the K-wave industry and its gradual embracing of global fan culture, "fansubbing" is a direct form of interactive translation, especially in K-pop. The artists and the platform-provider companies eventually relied on free subtitling translations done by fans, even creating page and app functions to pull the semi-legal practice of fan-subtitle translations out of the shadows and into the open public space.[2]

In terms of linguistic transformation, the formation of new words, comparable to the hybrid expressions frequently used among multilingual speakers, is another direct form of translation influencing the culture of K-wave recipients.[3] In contrast, some English-sounding words of Korean origin (akin to "Konglish" in that their origin is more Korean than English) also gain habitual usage within fan spheres in a "translingual" manner.[4] This kind of collaborative "lexical migration" happens e.g., via social media interactions, and globalizes Korean origin words among the varieties of "Englishes."[5]

These audience-language transformations are all possible due to the popularity of K-wave content, enabling unexpected cultural changes in the audience sphere. Translation also relates to the allure of cultural distance, which credits translators and the audience with the ability to "translate" cultural distance by receiving, accepting, and recreating new meanings, thereby creating cultural shifts in the audience. For example, cultural and linguistic distance between Korean and target languages can be not an obstacle but rather add to the attraction, increasing affective affinities by providing alternative cultural answers to the audience, while conveying universal appeals and the impression of worldly sophistication.[6] In short, the inevitable gap in translation leads to productive interpretation among fans, which in turn impacts the K-wave industry.[7] Cultural concepts and objects conveyed by K-content, like *chimaek or oppa*, create reliable currencies that fan audiences increasingly learn and look forward to, since they provide anchors of navigation in the culturally foreign, yet universally appealing world presented in K-content. These avid receptive dynamics increase the appeal and longevity of K-wave content.

The question is whether these dynamics extend even further over time, influencing K-wave content in turn as well. As an overarching topic in translating the K-wave from a fan-driven and/or linguistic lens, the unique traits of K-wave globalization have been oft-studied. However, as a means of connecting the two strands, the question of what translation does to the K-wave has been underexplored.

To explore this strand further, we must take the role of paid translation and professional translators in the K-wave industry into account, alongside fan translations. In an effort to save on paid translation labor, and perhaps also recognizing that fans might sometimes be better translators, platforms have at times allowed semi-formal fan subtitling and interaction features. They have been

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Brian Yecies et al., 'Global Transcreators and the Extension of the Korean Webtoon IP-Engine', *Media, Culture & Society*, ahead of print, SAGE Publications Sage UK: London, England, 30 September 2019, Sage UK: London, England, https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443719867277.

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Aegyung Shim et al., 'Cultural Intermediation and the Basis of Trust among Webtoon and Webnovel Communities', *Information, Communication & Society* 23, no. 6 (2020): 833–48, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1751865.

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Won-Seok Cho and Sung-Eun Cho, 'BTS Army Fandom and Fan Translation', *The Journal of Translation Studies 22*, no. 1 (2021): 247–78, https://doi.org/10.15749/JTS.2021.22.1.010.

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Ji-Hae Kang and Han-Nae Yu, 'Translation of the people, by the people, for the people?: A critical analysis of a platform company's use of fansubbing', *The Journal of Translation Studies* 22, no. 1 (2021): 9–37, https://doi.org/10.15749/JTS.2021.22.1.001.

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Cho and Cho, 'BTS Army Fandom and Fan Translation'.

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Elena Chang, 'ATA 61 Recap: Translating Into Hollywood: A Case Study of the Oscar-Winning Film Parasite', Audiovisual Division Part of the American Translators Association, 30 March 2021, https://www.ata-divisions.org/AVD/ata-61-recap-translating-into-hollywood-a-case-study-of-the-oscar-winning-film-parasite/?utm_source=chatgpt.com; Margy Rochlin, 'How Steak and Korean Instant Noodles Illustrates Class Tensions in Bong-Joon Ho's "Parasite"', Food, *Los Angeles Times*, 19 October 2019, https://www.latimes.com/food/story/2019-10-19/parasite-ramdon-bong-joon-ho-ramen-udon-jjapaguri.

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Naomi Vanderlip, 'The Controversy behind "Squid Game's" English Translations', *Mustang News*, 9 November 2021, https://mustangnews.net/the-controversy-behind-squid-games-english-translations/; Viv Groskop, 'Lost in Translation? The One-Inch Truth about Netflix's Subtitle Problem', Television & Radio, *The Guardian*, 14 October 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2021/oct/14/squid-game-netflix-translations-subtitle-problem.

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Brian Yecies et al., 'Communicating Through Chaos in the Webtoon Parasocial Intimacy Chamber', *International Journal of Communication* 18, no. 0 (2024): 29.

part of companies' localization strategies, even for key IP content such as popular webtoons, whose popularity spawns TV formats.[8] This "cultural intermediation" is participatory and decentralized, and influences the production, circulation and translation of digital media.[9]

This intrinsically motivated, unpaid outsourcing has its limitations. While fan translations, enabled by affective labor and affective communities of fans, have driven the unprecedented spread of K-content, as in the famous case of BTS, the obvious reliance of large companies on fan translators and their free labor has its limits.[10] As seen above, fan translators are given unpaid, quasi-professional platforms, e.g., NAVER V LIVE, which provide UI functionalities that invite fan labor. However, these supposedly "open" platforms of "crowd intelligence" do not reward translation quality, but quantity, and provide no channels for quality discussions among fansubbers, the reviser role is only open to the platform company, while the revising process or standards, if any, are unclear.[11]

Lastly, fan translations ultimately fail to cover the vast amount of content that companies do not provide translations for (e.g., all kinds of textual and audiovisual content, fan club membership kits, company announcements, and much more), in the worst cases prompting protest from the international fandom and fan translators regarding the unfair expectations of large companies about the extent of fan loyalty.[12] These precedents are not only hierarchical and sometimes exploitative on the part of large companies, but also offer weak guarantees for translation quality. While the checks and balances of translation, feedback and simultaneous improvement of translations can be more frequent when the fan community is large and the communication channels are openly horizontal, this is not always the case, and leaves uncertain the translation outcomes for these unfortunate other cases. Considering that the marketing images of K-pop artists are carefully crafted, the effects of translation are relatively neglected as a result.

3. Illustrative Cases (Translation-Mediated).

Evidence from film and series subtitles and from webtoon localization shows clusters in practice and a recursive feedback loop. *Parasite* coined "ram-don" for "jjapaguri" and rendered "Seoul National University" as "Oxford" to land the prestige joke instantly to Anglophone viewers.[13] These choices show how subtitle translation actively shapes audience uptake. In *Squid Game*, debates around rendering "gganbu" ("loyalty" vs. "shared ownership") show how small lexical decisions shift perceived relations.[14] In webtoons, English localization works under bubble-space constraints and evolves with reader feedback on platforms, evidencing a recursive loop between translation and reception.[15]

Professional, i.e., paid translators of K-content are different from fan translators in that they are remunerated, but they may or may not have received formal training as translators through higher education or prior experience. Given this, they may differ most crucially in the following aspect: They may or may not be fans of the content themselves, which can affect their fluency in the cultural linguistics or their ethical devotion to the translation outcome, both of which can matter for translation quality, but also their ability to judge when to communicate and localize appropriately, for example when having to circumvent potentially politically sensitive nuances to protect the content from unwarranted conflict (this often happens with K-pop content). As a last ethical hazard, these paid translators may

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Yecies et al., 'Global Transcreators and the Extension of the Korean Webtoon IP-Engine'.

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Jaehyeon Jeong, 'Webtoons Go Viral?: The Globalization Processes of Korean Digital Comics', *Korea Journal* 60, no. 1 (2020): 71–99, https://doi.org/10.25024/KJ.2020.60.1.71.

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Brian Yecies et al., 'Korean Webtoons and Collective Innovation: Expanding Europe's Creative Industries through Competitive Localization', *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research* 33, no. 4 (2020): 459–73, https://doi.org/10.1080/13511610.2020.1828839.

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Kyoungyi Kang and Hyerim Kim, '한국 웹툰 번역 업계 문제점 분석 및 개선방안 제언 - 관계자 심층 인터뷰 조사를 중심으로', 번역학연구 22, no. 3 (2021): 9–39.

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Ji Young Park, 'Who Are "Native Revisers" in Korea? A Survey on L1 Reviser Qualifications, Competence and Job Satisfaction', *The Journal of Translation Studies* 22, no. 3 (2021): 137–64, https://doi.org/10.15749/JTS.2021.22.3.005.

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Kang and Kim, '한국 웹툰 번역 업계 문제점 분석 및 개선방안 제언 - 관계자 심층 인터뷰 조사를 중심으로'.

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Hye-yeon Chung et al., 'Significance of Recall in Automatic Metrics for HT Evaluation', *The Journal of Translation Studies* 23, no. 1 (2022): 81–100, https://doi.org/10.15749/JTS.2022.23.1.003.

or may not have higher bilingual proficiency than fan translators, which is a real concern in the scarce pool of apt professional translators from Korean to various languages.

The embracing of fan translations, as seen in K-pop, has also been observed in the field of webtoons. NAVER/LINE Webtoon, the largest webtoon platform provider, has offered a volunteer translation function for popular titles, accompanied by guidelines and community channels such as group pages and forums. Considering that these webtoons have the potential to become or already are globally popular multi-IP engines, volunteer work into multiple languages cuts costs for the company, but keeps the planning and quality control of translations out of the industry´s strategy and renders the translators invisible.[16] Hence, the revenue models of webtoons also influence the recruitment mode of translators, which is illustrated by the contrasting revenue models of competitors. As alternatives to the NAVER Webtoon model, paid service models have emerged across more platform competitors, enabling more revenue and diversifying business models and actors, and thereby encouraging global IT companies to import webtoons and service models as part of the overseas expansion of Korean webtoons.[17] These revenue models, which operate on the basis of licensed webtoons and "freemium" plans for readers, also have led to the creation of non-Korean platforms and greater competition in the webtoon market.[18]

However, the pool of capable professional (paid) translators and revisers who can localize webtoons in a natural manner for their audiences is notoriously scarce, and the low pricing means that the "main work" is not expected of the translators, but of native-tongue revisers, who are tasked with improving the translations r and make them more localized.[19] This last resort has downsides, since native revisers may or may not be proficient in both languages simultaneously, meaning that unilingual revision or monolingual revision may be the only option and the original is not checked.[20] In such cases, the last instance of checking translations for completeness, correctness, and adequate localization is the language editor, who again may or may not be native or bilingual.

Some researchers suggest a medium-specific and industry-wide set of standards for the field of webtoons, and highlight the need to build a data corpus that encompasses the patterns of good and bad translations.[21] While "hard" standards such as stylistic and format requirements (e.g., sound effect and onomatopoeia conventions, essential glossaries, and the threshold for inserting potentially disturbing footnotes, among others) are easier to integrate, the call for a data corpus of "gold standard" (or bad standard) translations can be attributed to the difficulty of standardizing what constitutes a "good" translation in K-wave content (here: webtoons). Even more so, basic guidance towards "good" translation is necessary for conceptualizing the roles, expectations, and strategies of translation in K-content and its many subdomains.

So, apart from "hard" standards such as those mentioned above that are easier to define, the more difficult category to establish is what constitutes a "good" translation of K-wave content. The answer may be K-wave-specific, and, further, specific to each domain of the K-wave, including different from the customs of translation evaluation. For example, localizing for an audience seeking popular and easy entertainment sometimes means the omission of cultural information that is hard to translate or impedes the flow of content. Automatic metrics for human translation evaluation tend to correlate recall (completeness) rather than precision (accuracy) with "good translation" when cross-checked with human judgement.[22]

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Kang and Kim, '한국 웹툰 번역 업계 문제점 분석 및 개선방안 제언 - 관계자 심층 인터뷰 조사를 중심으로'.

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Sung-Eun Cho and Jungye Suh, 'Translating Korean Beauty YouTube Channels for a Global Audience', in *When Translation Goes Digital: Case Studies and Critical Reflections*, ed. Renée Desjardins et al. (Springer International Publishing, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51761-8_8.

In practice however, and specifically for entertainment, omission can be part of the translator's toolbox, because localizing is a process of assessing many variables of intrinsic flow and extrinsic reception by the audience.

When translating within the format and functions of a medium, such as webtoons, creating immersive entertainment value requires highly refined localization skills and linguistic, (sub-)cultural, and artistic aptitude in both languages.[23] In pop-cultural localization, easy entertainment is key, and therefore, naturalness is important while also maintaining the accuracy of what the original content conveys. Additionally, perfectly synonymous meanings between languages are rare, cultural distances are significant (particularly to the West or North America as centers of pop-cultural hegemony), and there is a tendency to avoid footnotes in pop-cultural content. For these reasons, localization requires the content to "bend" to fit into natural nooks and crannies of the meaning-worlds of the audience´s language and culture. As a result, the content to be translated is often neither objective nor material, but rather a discursive process.

When the above trait, which is in part typical of translation in general, meets the unique globalized and fragmented traits of the K-wave, a recursive process can occur, in which the audience and the audience's context also influence the K-content, and not just vice versa.

Whereas cultural-hybridity and localization approaches explain what travels (forms of mixture and domestication), and sociological translation perspectives explain where norms come from, a discursive institutionalism-based lens centers how ideas become legitimate across translation pipelines over time. By treating translators and revisers as policy actors (coordinative discourse) and audiences as publics (communicative discourse), we can model K-wave translation as an iterative sense-making process in which "successful" clusters align cognitive fit (format, genre, platform) with normative fit (values, appropriateness). This complements hybridity and localization by giving them a temporal, actor-processual engine.

4. Recursive Theory of the K-wave Translation Process

I adapt discursive institutionalism to translation pipelines, define "meaning clusters," and map actors to coordinative and communicative discourse (Table 1). How translating the K-wave also changes the K-wave relates to the question of "good translation," especially in pop-cultural translation. The reason, in short, is that the aim and tolerance for localization are more pronounced when the translated content is entertainment. Thus, a closer consideration of the audience culture occurs in the form of translation, thereby allowing for discursive processes in which the current meanings inform which meanings should be maintained or changed.

At the same time, every domain of the K-wave is also its own domain of translation and requires different "translation strategies." As a fast-paced medium that reflects the zeitgeist almost in real time, YouTube video subtitle translations display new and different translation strategies, such as the use of neologisms, slang, and Internet terminology.[24] This kind of localized adaptation in speech patterns makes it easier for viewers to instantly understand and empathize with the nuances of the content, and conveys timeliness, which matters since simultaneity is one of the attractive attributes of YouTube content. From this perspective, the need for domain-adequate localization changes according to the varieties of audiences, requiring the translator to have both domain knowledge and acute bilingual and bicultural fluency. This

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Friend (*Chingu*, 2001), a Korean film by Kwak Kyung-taek, not to be confused with the U.S. sitcom *Friends* (Kim, 2005).

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Hyun Mee Kim, 'Korean TV Dramas in Taiwan: With an Emphasis on the Localization Process', *Korea Journal*, 2005, 12.

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Sung-Eun Cho and Won-Seok Cho, 'Analysis of Webtoon Fan Translation: Emotive Characteristics of the Tower of God fandom', 통번역학연구 19, no. 3 (2015): 239–63.

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Youn Soo Kim Goldstein, 'Translation Dilemmas in South Korea: Assessing the Translator's Role in the Global Success of Parasite (2019), The Vegetarian (2016), and Please Look After Mom (2011)', in *Transfiction and Bordering Approaches to Theorizing Translation: Essays in Dialogue with the Work of Rosemary Arrojo*, by D. M. Spitzer and Paulo Oliveira (Taylor & Francis, 2022).

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Kang and Kim, '한국 웹툰 번역 업계 문제점 분석 및 개선방안 제언 - 관계자 심층 인터뷰 조사를 중심으로'.

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Kang and Kim, '한국 웹툰 번역 업계 문제점 분석 및 개선방안 제언 - 관계자 심층 인터뷰 조사를 중심으로'.

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Christina Schäffner, 'Translation and Institutions', in *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Politics* (Routledge, 2018).

is why paid translations, when they are outsourced by importers and agencies to international students or non-translation professionals due to cost reasons, can disrupt the localization process. A subsequent failed connection to the audience leads to commercial failure as in the case of *Friend* (*Chingu*, 2001, dir. Kwak Kyung-taek)[25] in Taiwan, whose subtitles reportedly failed to convey the regional ties and macho spirit that drive the main characters' decisions, causing the film to be pulled from Taiwanese theatres after only three days.[26] Additionally, domain knowledge includes genre and often subcultural understanding. When these factors come together, it's no wonder that in some cases the quality of fandom-made translations surpasses official translations in terms of audience enjoyment.[27]

In the case of more successful (e.g., prize-winning) translations of international popularity, the translation strategies tend to be more free-form when, or more precisely, for the purpose of localizing. The translation of the book *Please Look After Mom* does so by "making changes, domesticating, adding, and omitting," *The Vegetarian* by deletions, ellipses, and the flattening of characters, and *Parasite* by "brute" localizing (such as using Oxford instead of Seoul National University) and coining neologisms akin to cognitive shortcuts.[28] In this manner, culturally complex content is rendered more easily digestible, understandable, and relatable to the audience by establishing universality, these being the aims of localization as a cognitively connective and discursively fluent form of translation (as opposed to localization that "alienates" the original).

Perhaps partly owed to the fact that it is a newer medium than books and films, webtoons pose new challenges. Webtoon translations display a high rate of mistranslations and low-quality translations, undermining the original work's value and failing to localize *for* the reception of the audience; their medium-characteristic challenge lies in their multi-textuality (i.e., storytelling happens through more than literal text) and their heavy usage of puns, slang and generational idioms.[29] In comparison to the above "good" examples in film and literature, webtoon translations are even more under-researched. Consequently, it remains relatively unnoticed that the webtoon translation industry has systematic and structural problems due to the lack of translators and editors and weak guarantees of uniform quality.[30] For these reasons, the medium of webtoons is at once a more difficult, but also more informative, case for what is "good" translation in the K-wave. Building on the above examples, the question of "good" translation in the K-wave can be broken down into *which intrinsic processes constitute translation in the K-wave*.

When holding as standard the ideal of translation that localizes in ways that are adequate to both the original and the translation alike, "good" translating is a discursive process that coordinates the best options among possible translations (i.e., between translator and reviser, either through direct channels or not), and then chooses the most adequate ones for the primary aim of communicating towards the audience (who are, technically, laypeople looking to be entertained). At the same time, the K-wave is not a giant body that is centrally coordinated and organized, which renders this process a loose and open one, with no overarching standards as of yet. However, standards, which are constraints and expectations regarding which meanings to change (e.g., localize) or maintain (e.g., translate directly), can still come from sources other than institutions with hard walls. In the latter case, translations are constrained and regulated by institutional design, as in the European Union and its research on how to treat metaphors in its parallel multilingual texts.[31] In this manner and more, institutional translation can be part of governing via shared

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Kaisa Koskinen, 'Institutional Translation: The Art of Government by Translation', *Perspectives* 22, no. 4 (2014): 479–92, https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2014.948887.

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Ji-Hae Kang, 'Institutions Translated: Discourse, Identity and Power in Institutional Mediation', *Perspectives* 22, no. 4 (2014): 469–78, https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2014.948892.

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Theo Hermans, 'Translation as Institution', in *Translation as Intercultural Communication: Selected Papers from the EST Congress, Prague 1995*, by Mary Snell-Hornby et al. (John Benjamins Publishing, 1997).

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Michaela Wolf, *Mapping the Field: Sociological Perspectives on Translation, International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 2011, no. 207 (2011): 1–28, https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl.2011.001.

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Vivien A. Schmidt, 'Discursive Institutionalism: The Explanatory Power of Ideas and Discourse', *Annual Review of Political Science* 11, no. 1 (2008): 303–26, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.060606.135342.

norms and expectations.[32] From this viewpoint, institutions guide translators' work as socially situated acts by giving them a normative understanding of their roles.[33]

But translation *is* also an institution, because to translate (correctly) is to have the "skills required to select and apply those norms that will help to produce legitimate translations."[34] This view extends the concept of how norms and expectations that guide translators in achieving legitimate translations come into being.[35] Hence, this view is more sociological, in that it ascribes a greater role to the discursive processes that lead to translated output and to the participating actors, than to the constraints imposed by "hard" institutions such as government bodies or companies.

To theorize the multi-levelled process of translating and revising for audiences in the globalized K-wave setting, I borrow from discursive institutionalism, which explains how institutions change or persist while distinguishing actors "inside" (policymakers) and "outside" (the public).[36] According to Schmidt, ideas have varying levels of generality and types (cognitive and normative). Policy actors engage in coordinative discourse, whereas political actors engage in communicative discourse with the public. "Successful" ideas and discourse arise when discourse is cognitively justifiable (interests) and normatively legitimate (values), that is by "getting it right" in terms of the meaning context. "Background ideational abilities" refer to abilities that allow actors to make sense of a given meaning context, while "foreground discursive abilities" refer to their agency to change or maintain institutions.

This framework can be applied to the sociology of translating the K-wave by conceptualizing the roles of translators, revisers, and audiences within a discursive process. The key concepts of Schmidt's theory can be applied as shown in Table 1.

Concepts of discursive institutionalism	Applications for translating the K-wave
Institutional change	Changes in original meanings during localization, audience reception, and cultural shifts.
Cognitive and normative ideas	Cognitive: styles that fit the domain, medium constraints, and genre format. Normative: localized text and content are judged appropriate within the audience's context.
Coordinative discourse among policy actors	Workflow among translators and revisers (professional or fan); language editors; platform guidelines.
Communicative discourse between political actors and the public	Translators and target audiences: they may share fan knowledge or cultural openness but not the same language capacity; feedback channels (comments, shares, watch/read data) matter.
Background ideational abilities within a given "meaning context"	Knowing which localizations are appropriate, to what extent, and for which cases.
Foreground discursive abilities, following a "logic of communication"	Choosing whether to change or maintain the original sense, concept, or word.

Table 1. Key concepts of Discursive Institutionalism and applications to K-wave translation (adapted from Schmidt, 2008).

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At the same time, the networked fandoms also exude strong constraints of how to translate for the K-pop artists, mainly geared to avoid drawing negative attention and conflict from inside or outside the fandom.

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Dal Yong Jin and Woongjae Ryoo, 'Critical Interpretation of Hybrid K-Pop: The Global-Local Paradigm of English Mixing in Lyrics', *Popular Music and Society* 37, no. 2 (2014): 113–31, https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2012.731721.

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Jeeheng Lee, *BTS and ARMY Culture* (CommunicationBooks, 2019).

The rapid spread of AI-assisted workflows (from MT post-editing to semi-automated captions) reconfigures both coordinative discourse (translator–reviser–platform) and communicative discourse (localized text–audience) in discursive institutionalist terms. Machine-generated baselines raise throughput, yet can entrench "literal-but-legible" defaults that underserve cultural nuance. Conversely, fan and professional revisers increasingly act as discursive correctives, re-authoring tone, social appropriateness, and affect. In pop-cultural settings where timeliness is rewarded, these pipelines accelerate feedback loops: audience uptake and backlash travel quickly, pressuring upstream choices (lexicon, humor, politeness levels) and, over time, nudging source messaging itself—an instance of translation recursively shaping the K-wave rather than merely conveying it.

In this framework, "good" translation need not correspond to traditional notions of "good" translation, but rather to translations that are deemed legitimate by the audience, that is, a "successful" matching of existing ideas (localizable concepts) with appropriate discourse (varieties of localized translations). In practice, audience legitimacy—not literal equivalence—marks a translation as "good" in this setting. Of course, the needs and conditions differ by cultural domain, audience type, the cultural-linguistic environment of the audience and more.

Defining the unit: I use *meaning clusters* to denote small, recurrent bundles of form + function (lexical choice, tone, politeness, genre and medium constraints) that reliably deliver "felt equivalence" for a given audience or venue. They are the practical units by which translators coordinate adequacy and naturalness in discursive institutionalism's coordinative discourse, and then test legitimacy in communicative discourse. Clusters let translators compare options, reuse what works, and explain choices in plain terms (not just "literal vs. free").

Identification procedure: (1) Pick a culturally loaded line or scene. (2) Draft a few options that vary in wording, tone/politeness, and format limits (e.g., subtitle length, speech-bubble space). (3) Check downstream response (editor notes, watch-time, comments/shares, later edits). (4) Keep the option that travels best and label it as a cluster for reuse.

Analytic payoff: *Clusters* make discursive shifts legible across time (e.g., how a joking honorific migrates from footnote to in-text layer to fully domesticated slang) and across domains (e.g., how a webtoon in-joke becomes a K-pop stage meme), enabling corpus-building and hypothesis tests about what "good localization" means per domain.

The different domains of the K-wave have different proximities to the audience, which means that the recursive outcomes of the discursive process described above are observed more clearly in some industries than in others. Due to factors such as the nature of connectedness between K-pop artists and fans, and between fans, K-pop is the domain that most directly and quickly adapts to the global market.[37] While not directly a process of translation, the growth of English lyrics in K-pop signals growing cultural hybridity through acculturation and re-acculturation to new multilingual and multi-sociocultural milieus.[38] Changes to the source content through discursive processes with audiences are, as is often the case in K-pop research, clearly observed in the case of BTS. Over time and amid a changing cultural climate, the band changed their messaging towards, and beyond, their fandom in ways that gradually reflected value shifts in the tide of globalization.[39] In this manner, they always conveyed the impression of close discourse.

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Eun-Young Jung, 'Transnational Korea: A Critical Assessment of the Korean Wave in Asia and the United States', *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* Volume 31 (2009): 69–80.

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Woongjae Ryoo, 'Globalization, or the Logic of Cultural Hybridization: The Case of the Korean Wave', *Asian Journal of Communication*, ahead of print, Taylor & Francis Group, 1 June 2009, world, https://doi.org/10.1080/01292980902826427.

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Angela Gracia B. Cruz et al., 'Cultural Globalization from the Periphery: Translation Practices of English-Speaking K-Pop Fans', *Journal of Consumer Culture*, ahead of print, 1 May 2019, Sage UK: London, England, https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540519846215.

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Hyunji Lee, 'A "Real" Fantasy: Hybridity, Korean Drama, and Pop Cosmopolitans', *Media, Culture & Society*, ahead of print, SAGE PublicationsSage UK: London, England, 11 July 2017, Sage UK: London, England, https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443717718926.

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Jieun Kiaer and Loli Kim, 'One-Inch-Tall Barrier of Subtitles: Translating Invisibility in Parasite', in *The Soft Power of the Korean Wave* (Routledge, 2021).

5. Translating the K-wave: Implications of a Greater Framework

Operationalization enables corpus-building, the establishment of standards for domain-fit evaluation, and collaboration with AI workflows. Applying the above theory offers both benefits of perspective and analysis. By imagining translation over time and across domains in the K-wave as shifting *meaning clusters* (discursive institutions) that are coordinated by language and culture professionals and then communicated to the audience, we can approach new questions such as: How does translation enable a global audience to immerse itself in content that is partly local and partly universal in the values it evokes? Why and how do the acceptable meanings of K-content translations shift across time and domains? For these and other questions that illuminate how the K-wave has been able to spread, translation and the entailed localization play a key role.

Many studies have offered definitions of the K-wave to explain its global appeal and spread, and many of them find causal factors in audience shifts that are partly coincidental (due to overall globalization) and partly reinforced by transnational K-content. The cultural hybridity and transnationality of K-content have been highlighted in this respect, and the K-wave is accordingly characterized as being "multi-layered and multi-directional."[40] Cultural hybridization, in this sense, is not only observed in Korea, but also in the audience countries, leading to transformations that are global as well as local.[41] The globally spread consumption of, and engagement with (e.g., through fan translations), K-wave content from Korea—which is supposed to be the cultural "periphery"—dislocates and inverts center-periphery dynamics, constituting so-called "cultural globalization".[42] This kind of transnational media, simultaneously containing familiarity and particular difference, enables and develops a "pop cosmopolitanism" in audiences in a manner that is not superficial, but long-lasting and sincere.[43]

In short, the K-wave is a globalized phenomenon due to a mix of traits that are attractive because they coincide with an expanded imagination and the technological advance of a globalized audience. K-content has been granted the ability to convince, evoke, and persuade—no matter whether *through or despite* foreignness. Regardless of whether familiarity, local particularity, or a mix of both is key to reaching global audiences, one omnipresent requirement is that, at least, the basic meanings must be conveyed as a prerequisite for establishing a connection with the viewer. This requirement was famously put into memorable words in the expression "one-inch-tall barrier of subtitles" in Bong Joon-Ho's acceptance speech. His mention also incidentally highlights that textual translations are the bridge that even audiovisual media must cross as a bare minimum to be appreciated for their value. It is also potentially the maximum, since many more complex verbal and nonverbal cultural clues are inevitably lost in translation.[44]

Popular culture content must "convince" the audience effortlessly, and this is doubly challenging when the content is conveyed through cultural barriers. Aptly localized translation, as the bare minimum of communication with the audience, must be achieved so that even its unfamiliar aspects become a source of allure, thereby accomplishing a cultural feat that contributes to the K-wave as a whole. Accordingly, entertainment localization often goes beyond direct translation to meet tone and format constraints while preserving core intent. This trait means that, in many cases, there are no objective truths when translating K-content, which adds

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Kang and Kim, '한국 웹툰 번역 업계 문제점 분석 및 개선방안 제언 - 관계자 심층 인터뷰 조사를 중심으로'.

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The main reasons for this lack of qualified human resources are due to reasons not limited to 1. A young field, 2. The underpaid nature of freelance translation 3. And a small pool of talents with adequate professional factors (bilingual proficiency, pop cultural and subcultural sensibility in both language realms, ability to work quickly)

to the discursive character of "translating the K-wave" that this paper describes. Meanings shift according to this discursive process, driven not only by transnational media content and transforming global audiences, but also by the translational step in between. This last factor has often been overlooked and taken for granted by research and industry alike, even though translations can technically make or break the success of K-content. In any case, just like transnational content and audiences, translations that act as the functional axis in between are also maintained and transformed within a perpetual process.

Given the above, the forms and shifts of translated meanings over domains and time become the object of analysis. The framework presented in this paper, therefore, provides analytical advantages. This is possible mainly through conceptualizing new categories for text analysis (a case study will be included in a future version of this paper). By labelling meaning structures, the negotiations between source and target cultures, according to context and adequacy, can become visible. By extending this research and building a corpus, such a database can be established and serve as an orientation for the search for standards in the fields of K-content translation, as has been suggested for webtoons.[45]

Using this concept, analytical advantages can be gained by distinguishing between cultural and domain meaning clusters. The former cultural meaning clusters are the units of adequate localization that the audience can enjoy. Domain meaning clusters are mostly restricted to pop culture, the bread and butter of the K-wave, and therefore span K-drama, movies, K-pop, webtoons and so on. By leveraging these categories, it becomes possible to evaluate and partially predict successful cases of K-wave contents and domains, by viewing their reception and the longevity of the K-wave as processes of convincing the audience and adapting to changing contexts.

In terms of practical benefits for the field of translation, this research can substantiate implications for the practice of translating the K-wave, by helping to define "good" K-wave translation and revision, e.g., as localization focused on naturalness without losing the original's essence. The framework is geared towards such implications by assigning hypothetical roles and expectations, imagining a two-step process of intrinsic coordination between (theoretically) bilingual professionals, ultimately serving the purpose of communication towards a (theoretically) monolingual audience. Such tools for understanding the process are valuable because the step of translating pop-cultural content is increasingly open to translation novices (untrained translators) and often operates partially through freelance outsourcing systems. As a result, the reliability of outputs is weakly guaranteed, since the supervising roles (revisers, language-team editors, etc.) are themselves weakly guaranteed.[46]

Lastly, extensions of this research can provide avenues for collaboration with machine learning. While a case study is not yet presented in this paper, it can consist of text analyzing different kinds of translations of the same text, using the above categories of meaning structures. Machine translation, human translation, and AI-generated translations can be compared in this kind of research design.

Taken together, the framework moves practice from ad hoc choices to reusable "meaning clusters" validated by audience legitimacy. For research, it supplies an aligned unit for study across subtitles and webtoon localization; for industry, it supports concise playbooks and review checklists that raise speed without flattening nuance.

Conclusion

This paper reframes translation in the K-wave as a recursive, institutionally situated process and introduces *meaning clusters* as practical units for analyzing how wording, tone, and format gain audience legitimacy. This perspective clarifies why translation effects are larger than their current visibility in research and industry practice. By foregrounding the wider and longer processes that translation is entangled with, the paper opens new explanatory and practical directions.

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AI use for English editing

Generative AI (ChatGPT, OpenAI) was used solely to improve the English clarity and style at the author's direction. The author reviewed and edited all outputs and is responsible for the final text. No AI tool was used to generate, analyze, or interpret empirical results.

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