

Stockholm University
Term paper, English B
Language survey course

S U B T I T L I N G

A study of the specific problems of subtitling
in contrast to text translation

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WHY A TERM PAPER ABOUT SUBTITLING VERSUS TEXT TRANSLATION?

This year, I celebrated my twentieth anniversary as a translator, the last eight of them as a subtitler. Consequently, I have a long, personal experience of both text translation and subtitling, and in this term paper, I will compare the two fields from my own point of view. It will be a personal reflection, written in I-form. I will not explain the technical side of subtitling, that is excellently dealt with in Jan Ivarsson's book *Subtitling for the Media*. Instead, I will concentrate on some of the problems that are connected with subtitling - all of which I have struggled with myself - in contrast to text translation. But before I start dealing with the problems of subtitling itself, a few lines about the status of the profession.

THE STATUS OF SUBTITLING

Subtitling is a very recent form of translation. Written text was introduced five thousand years ago, and translations to other languages have been made almost as long, but talking films have only existed for about seventy years. Maybe due to this fact, the profession of subtitling has a lower status than the one of text translation. People often say to me "maybe you will some day get the chance to translate books", implicitly, "maybe you will be lucky enough to do proper, decent work".

There is clear evidence of this attitude on a more official level. In book reviews, the name of the translator is always stated, whereas the subtitler is never mentioned in film reviews. Translators receive a sum of money for each library book out on loan, but subtitlers do not receive any money for video tapes out on loan. And there are scholarships for book translators, but none for subtitlers.

In Swedish, my profession does not even have a name. The word "översättare" is in both the two Swedish dictionaries and the encyclopedia where I looked it up explained as "to transfer written text from one language to another", and there is no such word as "undertextare" listed in the three books, and not even in SAOL.

Subtitling may have a low status in Sweden, but millions of Swedes read the result of subtitlers' work every day - a kind of work that, though it is written, actually is more similar to oral interpretation than to text translation, a fact that I hope will be evident in this term paper. And now, I will deal with the major problems I encounter while subtitling.

LIMITED SPACE

Text translators rarely have to count characters. We subtitlers have one or two lines at our disposal, and if our translation is one or a few characters too long, it has to be changed. In some cases the whole sentence has to be re-written, but the simplest way is to find a shorter synonym for one of the words.

The length of the line, however, is not only dependent on the number of characters. Due to the fact that most Swedish subtitles have proportional letter spacing, another word with the same amount of characters as the first choice can fit in just because it contains thinner letters, like 'f', 'i', 'l' and 't'. (The broadest letters are 'm' and 'w'.) An example of this is "de flesta" versus "flertalet". They both have nine characters, but "de flesta" has only three thin characters and a blank space, which requires more space than a thin letter. The result on screen is that "flertalet" appears to be one letter shorter than "de flesta".

If necessary, text translators can explain difficult words and expressions at great length, either in the text or as a footnote, a possibility that we subtitlers simply do not have.

An example of our daily efforts to shorten original speech and still maintain the same meaning is the sentence "You make them cry, I make them laugh." (1). The translation had to fit in on half a line. "Du får dem att gråta, jag får dem att skratta." is 46 characters, 1 1/3 line, which was out of the question. How did I solve it? Think about it and have a go yourself! My translation is 19 characters, and you will find it at the very end of this term paper.

LIMITED TIME

For obvious reasons, text translators never need to count seconds, which we subtitlers constantly have to do. Each text, consisting of one or two lines, only appears on the screen 2,5-8 seconds. The viewers must therefore preferably understand it immediately, so it must not be too difficult or too far-fetched.

But apart from this time aspect, there is also another one that can have devastating consequences: we subtitlers often work under a hard time pressure. Naturally, this can result in ridiculous and unnecessary translation errors, but the worst case scenario is when a subtitler of a movie film is forced to subtitle it only from the script, without having the possibility of watching the film. Fortunately, I have never experienced that, but I have seen a movie where the word "gun" was translated as "pistol", when a huge rifle pointed towards me on the screen.

BAD SCRIPTS AND NO SCRIPTS

The scripts are hardly ever 100 % correct and never to be trusted. Sometimes it is a pre-production script, and the final version, the film, has been altered, and sometimes the script was actually written down from the film, but when the writer did not hear, he or she just left a blank space or wrote something that sounded similar. Many of the translation errors that can be seen on the screen are due to this: the subtitler wrote routinely what was in the script and did not listen closely enough to what was actually said. "A subtitler must have well-sharpened ears", a subtitler once said in a newspaper interview.

Some examples: in a documentary about art (2), the person on screen said "cylinder seals", but the script writer, who obviously had not studied art, heard and wrote "silver seals". In a police story (3) the script had the phrase "weakness protection". That is also what I heard, and I translated it with "värnande om de svaga". But the last time I looked the film through, it suddenly struck me that they said "witness protection". In one script (4) I found "freezon ditch" for "raison d'être" (!).

For me, the greatest problem is when I do not hear at all what is said, not even after listening 25 times. Then I ask two or three colleagues to listen, and if possible also a native speaker. If there is loud noise in the background, traffic, music, etc., it may turn out completely impossible for anyone to hear. If nobody can solve it - and that does happen - then the only reasonable thing to do is to write something logical that nobody will react against.

It is crucial always to be logical. An example: in a film (5), a boxer said "I was 10-0 in one", and I understood that he had won ten rounds in a match. But it did not fit in with the context, so I called a boxing expert, and he immediately said that what I heard did not make sense. It must be "I was 10-0 and 1", which means "I had fought eleven matches, of which I had won ten, lost none and one was a drawn".

I have also experienced that I was completely sure that I heard what was said, it fit well in with the context, and it turned out to be wrong anyway. A man in a documentary (6) was talking about torture, and he said distinctly: "There is no skin involved in our methods." I understood exactly what he meant; that they did not beat people, they did not torture them in any way that left any marks on the skin, but in other ways that could not be seen, for example with electric shocks and psychological torture. This program was made by a Swede, and he examined my translation before it went on air. He claimed that the man said "there is no *skill* involved in our methods", that is to say they used simple, crude, non-sophisticated methods. He was completely sure, because the two of them had discussed the matter for hours after the filming. I listened again, over and over, but I still heard "skin". Of course I trusted the program maker and changed my translation, although I am sure that many viewers heard it the same way I did.

ERRORS

Films are teeming with errors. Important facts presented in a wrong way have to be translated as they are said, just like in texts, because it is the originator's or the speaker's

responsability. Simple slips of the tongue, though, may be corrected. But when a doctor says that a patient's left leg is broken (7), when the film clearly shows that it is the right one, should I write left or right? In this particular case, I chose neither and only wrote "ben".

WORD PLAYS AND AMBIGUOUS WORDS

Readers of a translated text seldom compare it with the original. A book translator can therefore omit untranslatable jokes, word plays, etc., or change them to something completely different without the readers' knowing. But film viewers hear the original dialogue, and therefore we subtitlers are forced to write *something*, we can never omit a passage just because it is difficult.

In the luckiest cases, we can translate word plays and ambiguous words directly and maintain the same meaning in Swedish. But in most cases, we have to come up with a different idea with the same result, for example laughter. An example of this (8):

A person in a pub says: "The Yank here will probably have a shot of Wild Turkey." The American in question (who is from the future) does not know that Wild Turkey is a kind of whiskey, and answers: "No thanks. Where I come from, turkey is an endangered species."

Since they are in a pub, I tried to find something to drink that could be misunderstood, and my solution was: "Jänkaren vill nog ha sig en jamare." "Nej tack, där jag kommer ifrån äter vi inte katter."

Here, I risk the situation that some people miss the joke, understand the word "turkey" and find it strange that I translated it with "katt".

When it comes to ambiguous words that are not ambiguous in Swedish, the three options are to choose one meaning, or the other, or something fuzzy that can be interpreted either way. Sometimes the original sentence may not even be meant to be ambiguous. In this example (9), I am still not sure:

A man and a woman are naked in bed together, tickling and

touching each other, laughing. The woman does something off-screen, and the man says: "That last one is going to give me a permanent limp." Did she do something to his penis, or to his foot? Whatever I would choose, I could be sure that some viewer would interpret it the other way. I chose the blurry middle way and wrote: "Den där sista gör mig oduglig för gott."

SONGS

Song lyrics are translated both in texts and in films, but the difference is that we subtitlers have to write the lyrics in rhythm with the melody, so that the viewers can sing the song they hear. Subtitlers that are not musical should avoid films with songs.

DIFFERENT VARIETIES OF ENGLISH

It is a fact that the varieties of English vary more in spoken than in written language. Words that are spelled in the same way can be pronounced very differently, and are therefore a larger stumbling-block for subtitlers than for text translators.

Examples:

In a South African documentary (10), black speakers used the words "whack" and "whack house" several times. I found no such words in any of my dictionaries, and not until I listened carefully to the context did it strike me that the words were "work" and "workers". The expression "his body was bent" also took me a while to solve, before I finally grasped that the sound /ɜ/ is pronounced much more open, like /e/ or /æ/, and that "bent" in this case was "burned". The sentence "they are heavy doctize" I could not solve. But luckily, the Swede who had made the documentary could help me - it turned out to be simply "they are having doctors".

SUMMARY

Subtitlers in Sweden have a profession of low status, although millions of people can see our work every day. The main difference between subtitling and text translation is the fact that film and TV viewers can hear the original language

simultaneously as they read the Swedish text. This forces us subtitlers to solve every problem and never gives us the options of omitting, adding, explaining or changing too much, and gives us limited space and time at our disposal. The major problem for a subtitler, at least for me, is when it is impossible to hear what is said - a problem that text translators are never confronted with.

LIST OF REFERENCES

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- (1) *Tempest*. Director: Mazursky, Paul. USA 1982.
- (2) *Art Ache*. Originator: Meijer, Marie. USA/Sweden 1991.
- (3) *Time Trax, ep. 1*. Creators: Bennett, Harve/Hayes, Jeffrey/Rosenberg, Grant. USA 1993.
- (4) *Parker Lewis, ep. 15*. Producer: Phillips, Clyde. USA 1991.
- (5) *Palace Guard*. Director: Contner, James A. USA 1991.
- (6) *Hemligt uppdrag Sydafrika, del 2*. Originator: Ersson, Boris. Sweden 1996.
- (7) *Time Trax, ep. 6*. Creators: Bennett, Harve/Hayes, Jeffrey/Rosenberg, Grant. USA 1993.
- (8) *Time Trax, ep. 13*. Creators: Bennett, Harve/Hayes, Jeffrey/Rosenberg, Grant. USA 1993.
- (9) *Palace Guard*. Director: Contner, James A. USA 1991.
- (10) *Hemligt uppdrag Sydafrika, del 1*. Originator: Ersson, Boris. Sweden 1996.

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My translation: Du oroar, jag roar.