

On subtitles in television programmes

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« Sous-titrer a un aspect déprimant pour qui possède l'esprit philosophique. En condensant des phrases on s'aperçoit qu'on pent presque tout dire en si pen de mots que l'exercice du langage paraît une fonction humaine pour ainsi dire superflue. Tout ce qui fait le charme de la conversation, des échanges d'idées, pourrait se réduire à quelques grognements. L'âge des cavernes, tel que nous le concevons. Pourtant, il y a la grotte de Lascaux et aussi cet émerveillement toujours renouvelé du traducteur devant la trouvaille du mot juste, de la phrase ramassée et en même temps bien écrite. » (Caille, p. 109)

Denmark hardly differs from a number of other small countries in that a large proportion of the television programmes are, in part or in their entirety, of foreign provenance, and that these foreign interviews, reports, and films are not synchronized or dubbed, but shown with Danish subtitles while the original soundtrack is heard in full.

In Denmark these subtitles have often been criticized by reviewers and private individuals in the press. Faced with criticism, the executives in charge of television translations have always maintained that most criticism was unjustified because it did not take into account the fact that the subtitles were sometimes not translations proper because they had to shorten the message, and that the factual errors were few and far between, so that the standard was actually very high.

One point which has been consistently overlooked in these debates is that in a small country like Denmark the proportion of the population which has at some stage or other learnt one or several foreign languages is relatively high, and that many people must therefore be using foreign programmes as a means for keeping up, possibly even improving their command of foreign languages. For this reason they will, time and again, resort to the subtitles in order to increase their vocabulary or check their understanding of what is being said. And in so doing they are, inevitably, subjected to strong audiovisual teaching methods, *vim.*, (1) the original message, (2) a translation of it, and (3) a 'stimulus', *i.e.* a picture or a sequence of pictures showing what the speech refers to. Accordingly the type of translation we meet with in television subtitles may affect the audience's mastery of a foreign language - and to my mind this goes far beyond the more orthodox question about loyalty or disloyalty to the original message which is of interest mainly to people with a good knowledge of the source language.

This question has long interested me, and, finally, in April 1974 I was able to check on whether the criticism of translations from English was justified or not, by carefully analyzing all Anglo-American cuts and programmes in a 14-day period.

Allowance was made for the special conditions for making subtitles, *vim.*, (1) that not all who spoke

English were native speakers, so that their errors, if any, had to be corrected; (2) that some items, mainly in the news programmes, must be made at a moment's notice; and (3) that it is often necessary to cut a message down to the bare essentials, especially when the flow of speech is rapid and uninterrupted, partly because the subtitles must remain on the screen long enough for even slow readers to grasp what is said, and partly because no more than two lines, each consisting of 28 typographical units (i. e. characters, marks, and spaces), can be shown at a time.

Nevertheless, I was forced to conclude that the overall standard was not so as to warrant the claims of television executives. However interesting this conclusion may be to the Danish public, I consider it more profitable to analyze the errors made in the translations as they appeared in the subtitles in order to determine at what point(s) in the translation process they originate. ... 197//

Despite the fact that subtitles are used extensively in small linguistic communities where the potential audiences are not sufficiently large to warrant dubbing, the errors made in this special line of translating have apparently not been subjected to any kind of systematic analysis ¹. This is what I shall do on the following pages, but before then I would like to point out that my analysis must out of necessity be based on speculation about how particular errors are made since the translator himself, being unaware of the fact that he has made a slip, will be unable to pinpoint its causes or where it happened. It goes almost without saying that this analysis must be based on the message/word we find in the target language when compared to the message/word we find in the source language.

Most of the pitfalls identified will also be well-known in 'ordinary translations', but it may perhaps be claimed that television subtitles highlight the sources of error in two ways: In the first place television items can, in a brief span of time, cover a wider and more varied range of the whole community life from the source-language area than say, virtually any book, article, or lecturer. And, secondly, they cover the whole communication process since the translators must here sometimes *listen* to Anglo-American speech (if there is no script they can *read*), and they must also be able to grasp the gist of any message, before they formulate it in the target language.

Using a simple sketch of the translation process as our point of departure (Figure 1), we shall first turn to the source-language and its culture (by which I understand all its extra-lingual phenomena).

I. 1 The Source Language and its Culture

A. H. Birse has pointed out that for good interpreters - and hence for good translators as well:

"Long and careful study of both languages is required and, more particularly, of the literature, history, and culture of the country concerned. Interpreters have got to keep up with evolving colloquialisms, of course, and -more important still -must be able to pick up personal idiosyncrasies of language and the character traits of which these are an indication. They need a complete knowledge of the subtler shades of meaning in foreign words or phrases and should remember the pitfalls of failing to recognize them."

But although, as noted by Fang p. 111, many studies of translation are based on the assumption that the translator fully understands the source language, this is far from being always the case. And many of the errors in the subtitles discussed here are due

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to the fact that the translator (or 'texter' as they sometimes prefer to term themselves) is a Dane, and that he has no full and complete understanding of the source language and the extralinguistic phenomena it refers to.

1.1 The Source Language

When there is no script, e. g. in interviews, *words may be misheard*. As it is mishearings also occur in everyday communication in the mother tongue, and accordingly they are not, properly speaking, translation errors since they are made independent of whether a message is to be translated or not. On the other hand translation does function as a kind of control of our understanding of what is being said, and mishearings will thus be revealed in the target language. In the subtitles here investigated an American director who said "it will take us about three years after beginning the construction to complete the plant" was thus subtitled as if he had said 'It takes about three years to complete the plan.'² Here the translator must apparently have misheard the American "plant" as 'plan'. It should be noted that words or terms based on this type of error are often quite difficult to reveal in the target language, even for people who know the source language well: Thus it took some time for the readers of a national newspaper in Denmark to find out that the 'French benefits' referred to in an article were supposed to be a translation of "fringe benefits"; and readers of another one were presumably surprised to hear that after Aldous Huxley had stopped taking along one volume of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* on his travels, he had, according to the Danish journalist started to buy 'paperbags' in the airports - unless the readers realized that the journalist had misheard the word "paperbacks".³ But even when he has a script this is no guarantee that the translator does not make errors at the physiological level, for he may also *misread a word or part of a message*.

Actually, there was only one example of what may have been some kind of *dyslexic reading error*, *vim.*, when "look at" was translated as if the original had been 'hook at'. But in a number of other instances, the translator had *overlooked* (or misread) a word in a passage, so that the meaning was changed in the Danish subtitle, e. g. in the following expressions where the words underlined were not taken into account in the Danish text: "to support the *small* trader" and "All the boys I trained *with*". To this we must add a few examples of downright *slovenly script-reading*, as when "How much is he paying you, Yankee, out of what he is claiming to ransom our kids for?" is translated as if it ran 'How much is he paying you, Yankee, out of what he demands from my people/men?', where, however, the picture is obscured because the Danish word 'forlange' may cover both 'claim' and "demand".

When we learn our mother-tongue we rarely use a dictionary but grasp the meaning of individual words from their linguistic or extra-linguistic context. A similar mechanism is sometimes used in learning foreign languages, and there were a few cases where the translator appears to have *construed the meaning of an English word from his knowledge of other English words*. Thus "drinking-joint" was

translated as if it were a 'drinking party', a 'binge', presumably because the translator had some idea that people were joining together. In other passages the translator has apparently *construed the meaning from the extralinguistic context* without paying due regard to what was actually said in the source language, so that it makes perfect meaning in the target language although it does in no way correspond to the original message. Thus a man who was answering a phone call from an irate landlord who tried to evict an undesirable character from his premises was made to say 'that must be his problem and yours' in Danish, although the English original sounded "It is his locale - and your locale".

Chavannes has once stated that "Un dictionnaire peut toujours etre ameliore" (quoted by Fang p. 130), and, as cited, Birse has also pointed out that an interpreter should keep up with colloquialisms,

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idiosyncracies, and, we may add, new words. There is a number of errors which can be bracketed as *failure to identify and understand neologisms, idiosyncracies, and - possibly - ad-hoc formations* not found in dictionaries. But in such cases it must be readily admitted that even the best translator may commit errors.

A few idioms were obviously recognized as *special terms, but were nevertheless mistranslated*, as when "to put down one's foot", was subtitled as if it meant 'to speak one's mind'. In other instances *translators failed to see that they were faced with idioms*. Thus the term "to be in for [trouble]" was translated as if the original had been 'to be in favour of/to go in for [a cause]'. And in other cases we meet with the pitfall Güttinger deals with under the heading "*Verkennen einer bildlichen Wendung*" (pp. 132-133) so that the remark by an American politician "I have been kicking around in politics for so long. .." was translated literally. Failure to recognize idioms and terms by degrees merge with cases where *it is doubtful whether the translator understood what was meant in the context*, or where *he disregards the meaning a statement or message must have in the context*. This happens e. g., when the term "regardless of where the chips may fall" is translated word by word at a time when two law-enforcement officers are discussing who is to blame for a leak in security. But since failure to grasp the meaning in the linguistic as well as in the extralinguistic context is quite common in translation, this example will suffice here.

Especially on television subtitles where it is all-important to grasp the essentials of a message, *failure to get the gist of the meaning will be revealed in translations*. This happened in a number of cases, e. g., when one of the people convicted in the Watergate affair was asked "Can you tell us whether you think you're the victim of some sort of post-Watergate morality or vengeance, something new which wasn't there before?" was subtitled as if the question had sounded 'Do you think you're the victim of an act of revenge.'

1. 2 The Anglo-American Culture

Here, too, are a few slips, covering *different aspects of Anglo-American Culture*, as when "the guard" on a train was translated as if he were a 'sentinel', or when an old man said "I am a soldier of the

Republic" with a heavy Irish brogue and this was translated as if he had said "I am a republican", etc.

II. *The Transmission Process*

In a sense it is wrong to single out this as something independent of the mastery of source and target languages, and careful listening and reading. Yet I think it is relevant to point out that sometimes *translators did not use common sense*, as when a single and perfectly normal man ordered "a steak" for dinner and this was subtitled as if he asked for 'a joint'.

And in many cases it was obvious that they suffered from what Güttinger has termed "*Scheu vor dem Wörterbuch*" (pp. 114-117) although this as noted by e. g. Gold, is essential to good translating.

171. 1 *The Target Language*

III. 1. 1 *The Target Language as Part of the Experience of the Source Language*

Since the translators are Danes it is no surprise that their knowledge of Danish should affect their understanding of Anglo-American. I found no clear-cut examples of mishearings based on such interference.

But there was at least one translation which was based on *interference in the translator's reading process*: English "five" was translated in Danish 'fire' (which means 'four') instead of the correct equivalent, 'fem'. What must have happened is that the English typographical picture has somehow or other combined with a similar (but not identical) Danish one.

False friends also crop up. Thus the above example of mistranslation of 'steak' (see point II.) is influenced by the fact that a "joint" is a 'steg' in Danish. ...// 200

The Translation in the Target Language

Since (1) television translations must often shorten the original message, (2) modern English exerts considerable influence on Danish, even in syntax, and (3) morphological, syntactical and stylistic breakdowns in translations are rarely as disastrous to understanding as semantic ones, I have focussed mainly on semantic errors in the translations.

A few words and terms were 'translated' into non-existent Danish ones, even though they had cognitive equivalents in Danish. Thus "industrial bassin" about the Ruhr District was translated into the *non-existent and incomprehensible* "industri bassin" instead of "industribækken" (which would cover the geographical concept of "basin") or the vaguer "industriområde" (i. e. industrial area). On the other hand the AngloAmerican "wine-steward" was subtitled 'vintjener' (i. e. 'wine-waiter') which was *comprehensible albeit non-existent* (the correct term is 'kyper' or 'kældermester'). And finally a few English words were taken over uncritically, possibly as the first stages of the process by which they gain acceptance as loan-words in Danish, as when the manager of a firm was called 'president'.

But in most cases the Danish equivalents chosen were part and parcel of the standard language.

In some few cases *the translator had apparently not dared go any further than what is authorized* by standard dictionaries, so when, e. g. a girl in 1943 in the USA spoke of the future "after the emergency", she was made to refer to time 'after our [i.e. her and her fiancée's] crisis' (of which we heard nothing else) in Danish instead of 'after the War'.

In another category were the words which were, so to speak, evidence of the incongruence between languages commented upon by Hjelmslev and illustrated with a sketch (p. 50) showing the areas covered by some words for tree, wood and forest (Figure 2):

Figure 2

træ	Baum	arbre
	Holz	bois
skov	Wald	Forêt

The failure to choose the correct equivalent when one word in the source language covers (or splits up into) two or more in the target language was seen several times, e. g. when a young man declared that he was taking some "bags" upstairs in English, and he was speaking of 'bags' in the 'plastic and paperbag' sense in Danish although he stood with some suitcases in his hands.

A much larger number of words was translated imprecisely, but yet so that the Danish *equivalent chosen was somehow or other within the same semantic area as in English*.

Thus "in certain moments" was translated as if it had read 'often'; and the question asked by a priest in a confession box "Are you ready, my son?" as if he said "Prepare thyself, my son".

In this particular category there are two subgroups I would like to call attention to.

One is to *mistranslate numbers*, as when "four" was translated by 'fourteen' (for better examples see Mitchel).

The second is to *translate a foreign loan-word in the source language by another loanword in the target language* which is not its semantic equivalent: thus "an ascetic" was translated as if it had sounded 'aesthetic' and "emphatic" as if the original English word had been 'concise'.

It is very hard, not to say impossible, to systematize erroneous translations which move further away from the source language message. As far as I can see it must be a question of degrees and subtle gradations between those translations which are beside the point but which still have some ever ...//

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so slender connection with the source language idea as when "itinerary" is translated as if the original sounded 'habits', up to the point where there is no connection at all.

Finally it should be mentioned, just for the record, that some subtitles bore witness to the fact that *the*

'tekster' was not good at expressing himself in Danish (This important point is emphasized by Nida and Taber, pp. 107-108).

II. 2 The Target Language Culture

In a number of cases the translators were faced with the familiar problem that the source-language phenomenon had no exact or well-known target-language equivalent.

I found good to render American concepts and phenomena such as "groundhog" and "applejack" by fairly good Danish equivalents like 'mole' and 'snaps' (brandy, aquavit). But in other instances the subtitling was less felicitous, as when "Dean Swift" was referred to in Danish as 'the Rev. Swift', for in Denmark Swift is known only as the author of *Gulliver's Travels*, and his ecclesiastical background is virtually unknown.

Conclusion

As far as I have been able to ascertain, the present study is the first analysis of pitfalls and sources of error in the translation process as we see it in subtitles on television.

In a way this is surprising when we consider the influence large linguistic communities have on small ones through mass media like films and television.

Here, however, I have limited myself to pointing out that the pitfalls in this type of translation may be more numerous and more complex than what we ordinarily suspect. If my analysis can help those who work on subtitling I shall be happy. And if it calls the attention of the powers that be to the responsibilities involved in translating -or 'texting' in the mass media - I have certainly fulfilled my aim. ⁴

Notes

1. Caille makes some observations on the difficulties involved in subtitling, pp. 108-109. In an unpublished undergraduate thesis at Handelshøjskolen, Copenhagen, Inge Lis Hansen analyzes and systematizes the principles used by the translators when they shorten the message in the target-language subtitles. She finds three main principles which sometimes overlap and which can, furthermore, be divided into some subcategories viz., (1) Omission (of words unnecessary for audience comprehension; of speeches, the meaning of which is clear from the extralinguistic context; of speeches that describe actions that take place at the same time (e. g. "Now Mr X is shooting Mr Z"); and of words, speeches etc., which are repeated); (2) Concentration, where the point is to contract the meaning of a longer message into only one or very few words; and (3) Fusion where several sentences or speeches are cut down to one only.

2. Since few readers can be expected to know Danish, and it would therefore be pointless to give too many Danish words, I have chosen to show what was said in English or American by "... " and to indicate what it was translated as into Danish by '... '.

3. For these two examples I am indebted to Sorensen (p. 41 fn.) and my colleague Grå Borup-Nielsen. In connection with these mishearings I should like to point out that to my mind there is a great difference between those cases where one or more phonemes are somehow or other misheard (as in the "plant-plan" example), and those where the word is misheard or taken for another because the speakers of the target language do not retain the phonological differences in loan-words from the source language: The point about the "fringe-French" and "back-bag" examples is that Danish does not differentiate between voiced and voiceless stops in final position.

4. The present article is a brief summary of an article "Om oversættelsesproblemer" which appeared in *Meddelelser fra gymnasieskolernes engelskforforening*, no. 70. August/September, 1974.

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