

Translation and the Movies

*Challenges And Difficulties During Movie Translation,
Especially Movie Titles*



Creative and Performing Arts

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Abstract

The birth of cinema was seen as an important step and a universal way of communication. This was partly true at a time when movies were silent and there was no need for translation. Images shown could contain cultural details typical of a certain country or culture and consequently were somewhat incomprehensible to foreign audiences. In the absence of linguistic interference the audience had the opportunity to identify characters based on their appearance; this was made easier if it was known which the source culture was. Although early silent films treated topics that needed no translation, that were considered as cross-cultural. Just after the start of sound movies began the need for movie translators and were presented the first challenges in this area.

1. Difficulties of movie translation

Movie translation can be a difficult job that requires a lot of experience and effort. If done well and with care it can convey the same message as the original text but if not done properly it can be a total failure and thus the movie is unsuccessful. Although as in any kind of translation field we face different challenges, in movie translation there are some challenges and difficulties that make this kind of translation even more difficult. A movie translator who has a long experience knows these difficulties and surely has encountered some of them. There are two main ways for translating a movie subtitling and dubbing, both these ways affect the original text in one way or another. On one hand we have dubbing which modifies the original text and makes it more convenient and familiar to the target audience. This method of translation adapts language according to the movements of the mouth of the actor enabling him to appear as speaking exactly the language of the target audience²¹⁶. On the other hand there is the subtitled movie translation which implies the subtitles synchronized to the language spoken and usually positioned at the end of the screen, which between the two methods is considered as the method that changes less the original text thus enabling the audience to experience language and cultural differences.

1.1 Jargons

This kind of vocabulary is one of the most difficult challenges that we encounter when we translate movies. Cultural bound words are very difficult to be translated and this becomes even more difficult when these two cultures have nothing in common. Based on this cultural differences translators allow themselves to adapt language where it is possible. The main aim is to convey the same message as the original text thus giving the movie translator the possibility to choose between expressions which sound the same and convey the same thing.

1.2 Blasphemy

Blasphemy in movie translation is another field worth discussing. It is a general truth that while studying a foreign language the first words that we learn are usually blasphemies. Either this is true or not is not our point of discussion but this supports the fact the cursing or blasphemies are universal phenomena which are particular for any language and culture. While translating these phenomena in another language we should try to maintain the same level of cursing or offending but at the same time we should stay loyal to the original text as well as to the target language.

1.3 Pseudonyms

This is another complicated field for the movie translators because it is related to culture and culture and connotations. Lets take for example a movie character who goes by the pseudonym "sticky fingers" and in this case it implies that this particular character is a kleptomaniac, if we translate this literally in another language it may not convey the same meaning. This becomes even more difficult for the translators when they translate movies where group of gangsters are related and each one of them has a particular pseudonym that is related to his character. The best solution here is to leave the pseudonym as it is.

1.4 Gestures

Gestures are one of the most difficult things to translate while translating a movie. Gestures imply different things in different languages and cultures and a good movie translator must this. In the cases when we do not have subtitling but dubbing this is one of the least problems. But what happens when the movie is sub-titled? How can we find the proper words to explain a gesture or a movement? For example in Albanian language in order to show approval or that they are listening to you they move their head side to side which is quite the contrary to the up to down that they use in United States. How can we translate this to words? This is a real challenge for the movie translators.

²¹⁶ Shuttleworth and Cowie 1997 "Dictionary of Translation studies", St Jerome Publishing

2. Movie title translation in Albanian language

Have you ever wondered how movie titles are translated in different world languages? As easy as it may seem translating them is never easy and most of them are lost during translation. Most of the movie titles need more than just mere translation; they need localization and sometimes even recreation. The art of translation is a very difficult art. It happens that a particular expression of the source language has more than one alternative in the target language and this is where the difficulty for the translators stands: they have to choose the best alternative, the one that stands loyal to the original but also conveys the same message to the target language. This dilemma is present in the movie translation especially while translating their title. Being that most of the movies in the Albanian language are translated from the Italian language, thus translation is translated, we shall see in the following examples that adaption of movie titles is done from the Italian language and most of the time the original title is not considered at all. In recent years with the adaption and implementation of the “Copyright Law”²¹⁷ in most of the cases the movies transmitted in Albanian channels are conform the laws which means they are bought from their original country. This means that their translation now is not done anymore from a second translation (before it was done from the Italian Language as most of the movies were taken from there) but from their original language which in most of the cases is the English language.



Original title: Shawshank redemption
 Italian title: Le ali della liberta (The wings of freedom)
 Albanian title: Krahët e lirisë (The wings of freedom)

As we can see from the above example movie title is adapted from the Italian language thus not taking in consideration the original title.



(a) Original title: Broken Arrow
 Italian title: Nome in Codice: Broken Arrow (Code: Broken Arrow)
 Albanian title: Emri në kod: Shqigjeta e thyer (Code: Broken Arrow)
 (b) Original title: A few good men
 Italian title: Codice d'onore (Honor Code)
 Albanian title: Kodi I nderit (Honor Code)
 (c) Original Title: Point of no return
 Italian title: Nome in codice: Nina (Code: Nina)
 Albanian title: Emri I koduar: Nina (Code Nina)
 (d) Original title: Swordfish (Peshku shpatë)
 Italian title: Codice: Swordfish (Code: Swordfish)
 Albanian title: Kodi: Peshku shpatë (Code: Swordfish)

²¹⁷ Law No.2004/45 Copyright and other similar rights

All examples presented above are translated from the Italian language. In the beginning of the 90-ies when there was a boom of foreign movies presented in Albanian screens it was more easy to translate them from the Italian language being that our culture and the Italian one have some similarities based on the geographical position. These kinds of translations were well accepted by the Albanian audience. In the following examples we shall see some title translations that are done from the original language which are mainly movies of recent years. Even though Italian language was not taken in consideration we shall put them just to make a comparison.



Original title: Life as we know it
 Italian title: Tre All'improvviso (Papritur tre) (Suddenly three of us)
 Albanian title: Si vetë jeta (Life as we know it)



Original title: Pay it forward
 Italian title: Un sogno per domani (Nje ëndërr për të nesërmen) (A dream for tomorrow)
 Albanian title: Paso nderin (Pass the favor)

3. Wrong translated movie titles

While movies are translated in different languages it can happen that their title differs for several reasons. The main reasons of this change can be so they become more adaptable to the target culture but even for making them more appealing and as a result sell more. A good example for illustrating the changes that happen while translating movies is the successful American movie "American Hustle"²¹⁸. From the several translations made to this movie we shall notice that none of the countries has translated the word "hustle" in a correct way, which according to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English²¹⁹ implies: ways of getting money that involve cheating or deceiving people. In the countries in which this movie is translated there does not exist a word which has the same meaning. Thus in Israel the title is translated as "American Dream", in France as "American Bluff" in Argentina as "American Scandal" while in Turkey is simply known as "Trickster". Anyhow as we can see in the following examples a total new title does not convey the same message there are even times when it can convey quite the contrary as in the following examples.

1.
 - A – Original title: Leon: The professional
 - B – The title in the Chinese language: The hit man is not as cold as he thought.
 - C – Albanian language: Leon

²¹⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Hustle

²¹⁹ Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, Fifth Edition, Pearson Longman

2.

A – Original title: The sixth sense

B – The title in the Chinese language: He is a ghost!

C – Albanian title: Shqisa e gjashtë (Sixth sense)

3.

A – Original title: The shawshank redemption

B – The title in the Chinese language: Excitement 1995

C – Albanian title: Krahët e lirisë.(Wings of freedom)

4.

A – Original title: Home alone

B – The title in Spanish language: Mi pobre angelito (My poor angel)

C – Albanian title: I vetëm në shtëpi (Home alone)

5.

A – Original title: The green mile

B – The title in Spanish language: Milagros Inesperados (Unexpected miracles)

C – Albanian title: Milja e gjelbër (Green Mile)

6.

A – Original title: Thelma and Louise

B – The title in Latin America: An Unexpected ending (Një fund I papritur)

C – Albanian title: Telma dhe Luiza (Thelma and Louise)

Conclusions

Movie titles when translated must be related to the movie plot because the title is the image and serves as a reference point for the target audience. As we noticed from the above examples the greatest difficulties are faced when we translate from cultures with which we have nothing in common. In these situations the movie translator must be careful and must use all his knowledge and experience to adapt the movie title with the original title or movie plot but at the same time he must stand loyal to the target culture and audience.

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