

International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies

ISSN: 2308-5460



Translating Culture-Bound, Context-Based, Idiomatic Expressions in Motion Pictures in Iran: Success and Challenges

[PP: 149-154]

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ABSTRACT

The paper investigates whether bilingual translators (English into Persian subtitles) are successful in filling the cultural gaps in this kind of translation. In bilingual subtitling, getting the gist precedes the art of translation and in doing so, mastery of the original language is of utmost importance. In this respect, the study aimed to examine the rate of success in translation of culture-based, context-based and idiomatic expressions. To this end, eight comedy motion pictures and their Persian subtitles were analysed to show that transferring cultural elements through subtitles, and giving the new audience the same impression as that produced by the original, do not happen in Iran as best as expected.

Keywords: Motion Pictures, Bilingual Subtitling, English and Persian Subtitles, Transferring Cultural Elements into another Language

ARTICLE INFO The paper received on: **13/04/2016** Reviewed on: **03/05/2016** Accepted after revisions on: **10/06/2016**

Suggested citation:

Norouzi, M. (2016). Translating Culture-Bound, Context-Based, Idiomatic Expressions in Motion Pictures in Iran: Success and Challenges. *International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies*. 4(2), 149-154. Retrieved From <http://www.eltjournal.org>

1. Introduction

Motion pictures are one of the most important sources of entertainment. In the last few years, there has been a growing interest in movies around the world. Most film directors and producers believe that a movie will not become successful one unless it has a great sale globally. As per to a research conducted between 2001 to 2010, the total box-office spending has risen by about one-third in North America while more than doubling elsewhere. (Economist, Bigger abroad, 2011)





As seen in the chart, foreign box office sales beat North American sales by a huge margin. Subtitles are used by different people and in different ways. They are used by those who are hearing-impaired. They are also used by those who watch movies meticulously and wish not to miss a word. Public places like restaurants, banks and stores, where film dialog would not be clear to be heard, can use subtitles to satisfy the needs of their customers. They can also be used for clips and old footage with muffled and faint sounds. Plus, most EFL students watch movies to improve their listening and it is done at the beginning with either same-language or translated subtitles.

Culture is another important thing that comes to the fore when you watch a movie in a foreign language. Even two countries, with the same language, have their own differences let alone two countries with two different languages. The importance of subtitles worldwide is undeniable. Therefore, the need for good subtitles is felt more than before. A good subtitle reflects the message of original in a way that is comprehensible for the new audience.

In order to understand a motion picture, especially in a foreign language, you have to master that language so that you can identify with the characters, get the point of the scenes, their sense of humor and so on. All people are not language learners, teachers and scholars. A society is mostly made of ordinary people who barely master their mother language. Therefore, translators' role is very prominent here. A translator who has mastery of not only his native language but also the foreign language has priority over others. Proficiency in source language is so important that many translation scholars have opinions on that. In his *Essay on the Principles of Translation*, Tytler (1907) put

emphasis on the translator's skill and mastery of the original in his first law. Dolet's first two principles also deals with translators' competency in the source language. (Munday, 2008)

Despite every effort translators make to translate subtitles, they are still not successful in transferring cultural elements. A number of mistranslations can be seen in Persian subtitles of American movies. A mistranslation will deprive movie lovers of an opportunity to fully understand the ins and outs of a movie. In Iran, authorities do not see subtitles as something systematic. Subtitling in Iran is kind of an underground activity. It is not done methodically. Care must be taken in translation of subtitles not just because culture is transferred here but a single goof will interrupt the new audience's trains of thoughts. In this respect, the purpose of this paper is to draw attention to the nascent field of AVT. Paper deals with bilingual translation of English into Persian subtitles to find whether subtitlers are successful in bilingual subtitling keeping the cultural flavor.

2. Review of Literature

To the author's knowledge, very few articles can be found in the literature that address the issue of subtitles. Although Delabastita calls it "still a virgin area of research" (Munday, 2008) in his *Translation and Mass-communication: Film and TV Translation as evidence of Cultural Dynamics*, this field has not been subject to much of research and still is in bud. This field comes to the fore when you find the real importance of it. As Piotr Kuhiwczak and Karin Littau (2007) put forward, apart from the fact that subtitling is often up to ten times cheaper than dubbing, it has other advantages that contribute to its increasing popularity. It usually takes much less time to subtitle than it does to dub. Moreover, subtitling also

leaves the original soundtrack intact. In his article on *Multidimensional Translation: Semantics turned Semiotics*, Henry Gottlieb (2005) talked about the additive nature of subtitling giving viewers total access to the exotic original while being semantically safeguarded by captions in the domestic language.

Comparing subtitling with other area of translation, one can find that at least the number of research done in other fields are quite a few. In their *Subtitle Translation Strategies as a Reflection of Technical Limitations*, Ying Zhang and Junyan Liu (2009) investigated different strategies used in the subtitle translation of Ang lee, Chinese movie director and producer. The constraints and strategies in translation are also discussed in this research.

Hamid Marashi and Khatereh Poursoltani's *An Analysis of Farsi into English Subtitling Strategies Employed in Iranian Feature Films* (2009) aimed at finding the common strategies in subtitle translation of Farsi into English. This study focuses on Iranian movies and their Farsi-into-English translation strategies. It attempts to find what method is used a lot in subtitle translation of Farsi into English through a table of frequency.

In his *How Is Culture Rendered* (2005), Pederson proposed different strategies that a subtitler can adopt in translation and whether they can solve all culture-bound problems through these strategies or not. It also mention the problems a translator would face in translation of culture-bound words and sentences.

Liu's *On the Classification of Subtitling* (2014) also showed different classification of subtitles and factors that are used in its classification. It also discussed Eduard Bartoll and Jan Ivarsson's

classification. In addition, it examines its merits and criticisms.

De Linde and Kay (Munday, 2008, p. 186) also noted the differences between interlingual subtitling and written translation, notably the space and time constraints. They also place much store on the image on the screen, which is normally inviolable, and the soundtrack in the source language which is retained.

3. Methodology

The researcher used the first 45 minutes of eight American comedy movies with rates more than six, according to IMDb which stands for Internet Movie Database and is an online database of information related to films, television programs, and video games for the purpose of randomization.

He also visited SubtitlePedia at www.sub.subtitlepedia.com for Persian subtitles. Table 1 illustrates the name of motion pictures, their directors and their release years. It is worth mentioning, Comedy was chosen due to the rich diversity of culture-based and idiomatic expressions in this genre. The order of the movies does not signify any degree or level of a characteristic like importance or superiority.

Table 1: List of Motion Pictures Analyzed in This Research

| Movie | Year | Director | Rate |
|--|------|------------------|------|
| Yes Man | 2008 | Peyton Reed | 6.8 |
| The Wolf of Wall Street | 2013 | Martin Scorsese | 8.2 |
| The Proposal | 2009 | Anne Fletcher | 6.7 |
| The Dictator | 2012 | Larry Charles | 6.4 |
| Diary of a Wimpy Kid | 2010 | Thor Freudenthal | 6.2 |
| Click | 2006 | Frank Coraci | 6.4 |
| Anchorman I - The Legend of Ron Burgundy | 2004 | Adam McKay | 7.2 |
| Anchorman II - The Legend Continues | 2013 | Adam McKay | 6.3 |

The researcher watched the first 45 minutes of each movie three times. In the first round, he wrote down the expressions



and statements of the original that are difficult to translate like phrasal verbs, idioms, proverbs or a culture specific expression and then in the second round he watched the movies with Persian subtitles and this time he wrote down the translation of the expressions he had already found in the first round. In the third round, the researcher watched the movies with full concentration so that he did not miss any point.

Examples of the expressions under study and their translations:

Idiomatic Expression:

In Anchorman II, a character says:
I kinda got the word by the tail here.

Persian Subtitle:

گرفتم رو دنیا دم جورایی به اینجا

This expression's literal translation makes no sense in Persian. According to TheFreeDictionary.com, an American online dictionary and encyclopedia, the definition of this expression is the following:

Have the world by the tail (with a downhill drag):

Have destiny under control.

In Persian it means:

بودن مراد وفقی بر اوضاع

But the subtitler translated this sentence literally which denotes nothing in Farsi.

Proverbs:

In Anchorman I, the actress says,
When in Rome do as the Romans do.

Here is its Persian subtitle:

دادم سفارش ها رومی مثل بودم، رم تو وقت

Again like the previous example, the word-for-word translation is meaningless in Persian.

When in Rome do as the Romans do means, follow local custom, as in *Kate said they'd all be wearing shorts or blue jeans to the outdoor wedding, so when in Rome we'll do the same*. This advice allegedly was

Saint Ambrose's answer to Saint Augustine when asked whether they should fast on Saturday as Romans did, or not, as in Milan. It appeared in English by about 1530 and remains so well known that it is often shortened, as in the example (The American Heritage, 2002).

Luckily, the exact equivalent of this proverb exist in Persian which goes,

شو جماعت هم رنگ رسوا نشوی خواهی

(Ghanbari, 2005).

Transferring this proverb into Farsi without manipulation looks completely odd to the target language audience.

Culture-Specific Expressions:

In the movie Click, the leading actor says:
I ain't exactly Thurston Howell!

Persian Subtitle:

ندارم تیله مایه راستش

Thurston Howell III otherwise known as "The Millionaire" is a character on the CBS television sitcom *Gilligan's Island*, which ran from 1964 to 1967, and later in syndication. Howell, portrayed by veteran character actor Jim Backus, is so wealthy that he took hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash and several changes of clothing with him for what was intended to be only a three-hour boat tour in Hawaii, one of the sillier premises of the show. Speaking with a Locust Valley lockjaw accent, Howell is a stereotypical member of the New England Yankee elite — a resident of Newport, Rhode Island, a graduate of Harvard University and a Republican (Thurston Howell, III, 2015).

In its translation, the subtitler used the meaning Thurston Howell connotes which are wealth and opulence. Some audience may not know anything about Thurston Howell. Plus using the name with extra explanation would violate the space and time constraints. Therefore, the best way to translate the aforementioned

sentence here is to convey the meaning this name connotes.

Deceiving Expression:

In the Wolf of Wall Street, the leading actor says,

We call him Mad Max because of his hair-trigger temper.

Persian Subtitle:

موهاش چون گفتیم می خله مکس بهش ما
موند می گیره مثل

Its translation is rather funny because here hair-trigger has nothing to do with the word hair, but if you take a look at its translation, you can fathom how the subtitle translated it clumsily.

According to Longman Dictionary (2009), a hair-trigger temper is the one that easily gets angry.

Persian speaker in this situation would say,

شدن عصبانی زود شدن، عصبانی راحتی به

4. Results and Discussion

Table 2 represents the subtitlers' rate of success in each movie separately.

Table 2: Subtitlers' success rate in translation of Culture-bound and Idiomatic Expressions

| Motion Pictures | Number of Errors (first 45 minutes) | Number of Culture-Based and Idiomatic expressions | Rate of Success |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|-----------------|
| Yes Man | 6 | 18 | 67% |
| The Wolf of Wall Street | 8 | 14 | 43% |
| The Proposal | 10 | 14 | 39% |
| The Dictator | 5 | 11 | 55% |
| Diary of a Wimpy Kid | 4 | 8 | 50% |
| Anchorman I | 9 | 25 | 64% |
| Anchorman II | 13 | 29 | 56% |
| Click | 14 | 20 | 30% |

It has been found that subtitlers are not successful in translation of idiomatic, culture-specific and context-based expressions. Among the motion pictures the researcher analyzed, Yes Man directed by Peyton Reed and Anchorman1 directed by Adam McKay had the rate of success more than 60% while in the others this rate of success barely reached 55% in the first 45 minutes. On the other hand, click directed

by Frank Coraci by 30% had the lowest rate of success. The overall measurement results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3 Subtitlers' overall success rate in eight comedies

| Number of Movies | Number of Errors in the First 45 Minutes | Number of Culture-Based and Idiomatic Expressions | Rate of Success in Translation |
|------------------|--|---|--------------------------------|
| 8 | 69 | 139 | 51% |

The overall rate of success represents that subtitlers are successful only in 51% of the translation of the expressions under study.

Conclusion

From the findings, it is possible to conclude that subtitlers are not successful in dealing with Culture-bound, context-based and idiomatic expressions. The findings have a number of possible limitations. One question, still unanswered, is whether the subtitlers are proficient in the source language or not. As was discussed earlier in the introduction, subtitling in Iran is completely an underground activity. Since no subtitler is available to answer the researcher's questions, and finding a concise background of a subtitler is impossible for they put their nicknames at the end of the subtitles, the researcher cannot say decisively whether the subtitles of the current research comes from an educated, well-educated, English-proficient or uneducated person. On the other hand, it is undoubtedly crystal-clear that subtitling, with the full knowledge of the fact that subtitlers are anonymous, is not done in a way it should be. With 51% overall success in just the first 45 minutes of eight comedies, it leaves nothing to say.

Culture-based and idiomatic expressions form the body of a movie and, to provide a good translation, special care must be taken in dealing with communicative elements of a movie so that the target audience can stomach these



elements as they do when they watch a movie in their own language. As Gottlieb puts (Gottlieb, 1998), subtitlers are expected to prioritize the overall communicative intention of an utterance over the semantics of its individual lexical constituents. Therefore, it begs someone who is well-educated and is not only master of his native language but also the foreign language.

The findings of this research can draw a little bit of authorities' attention to the fact that AVT is not done as appropriate as possible. There must be some facilities or institutes to train those who would like to do subtitling. These training course can go in depth and teach the trainees exotic cultures, sense of humor and sensitivities. Then they can start with the basics of audiovisual translation and its constraints. The list is endless.

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