

Mateusz Sajna (Wrocław)

Amateur subtitling - selected problems and solutions



Editors:

Viktorija Bilić

Anja Holderbaum

Anne Kimmes

Joachim Kornelius

John Stewart

Christoph Stoll

Publisher:

Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier

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Abstract:

In the following paper, we shall attempt to characterize the phenomenon of amateur film subtitlers – here called funsubbers – as opposed to anime fansubbers. After the initial explanation of the differences concerning these two types of subtitlers, we shall proceed to the core of the article, namely the analysis of errors made by non-professional translators who render film subtitles. There will be seven groups of errors selected on the basis of eight motion pictures analyzed for this paper. The main objective of the paper will be to indicate the most error-prone areas encountered in the work of amateur subtitlers. Furthermore, certain strategies by which amateurs can overcome subtitle-related problems will also be presented. We shall finish the article with conclusions drawn on the basis of the analysis and the available academic publications and propose a modified version of Hejwowski's translation error typology.

Keywords: film translation, subtitles, funsubbing, fansubbing, amateur translators, crowdsourcing

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¹ Based on Sajna (2011).

1 Introduction

Although amateur subtitling has been with us for over thirty years now, there are relatively few papers investigating the issues related to this type of translation. More attention has been paid to Japanese anime fansubbing with articles, for example, by Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez (2006) and Pérez González (2007). Amateur subtitling – as construed in this article – has been addressed so far by Bogucki (2009) and Krebs (2011). The former examines subtitlers' errors, caused mainly by the dearth of professional dialogue scripts², whereas the latter discusses the very *raison d'être* of amateur film translations, but provides no practical error analysis. In this paper, we shall attempt to indicate the areas in which non-professional subtitlers usually make a great number of errors. We shall choose such examples where the lack of professional dialogue scripts cannot be the reason for the inadequate translation because the scenes can be clearly heard and understood. The corpus of our study consists of eight films and 189 error examples, which have been divided into 14 sections. The selection of areas to be presented in the practical analysis of this paper has mostly been based on the sections which proved to be most troublesome for amateur translators and thus contained the greatest number of errors.

2 Fansubbers vs. Funsubbers

At the beginning of their article Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez (2006: 37) describe fansubs as "a fan-produced, translated, subtitled version of a Japanese anime program." It follows from their description that fansubbers are those amateur translators who dabble in translating Japanese anime alone. The reason for the above is probably that fansubbing started with Japanese anime, and for a long time was connected with this type of entertainment. In the early 1990s it was unusual for Japanese anime to reach overseas fans. These programs were not normally distributed outside of Asia. Consequently, fans decided

² A dialogue script is a written record of all the audible sounds (monologues, dialogues, narrator's voice, radio, etc.) of a particular movie. They are organized by scenes, thus providing translators with invaluable assistance.

to translate their favorite programs for other fans to watch in Europe and the USA. This was arguably a means of popularizing anime (Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez 2006: 44).

Nowadays, fansubbing might also be said to encompass fan translation of foreign films and digital games. Fan translators tend not to tackle dubbing because of the lack of professional equipment and the difficulty of this type of translation. As far as the translation of games is concerned, it appears that it is usually done by amateur translators who are faithful fans of a given title or series; however, a different situation can be observed in the case of films.

On the one hand, the majority of games are much more extensive than films, and they tend to have much more text to be rendered. Consequently, if game translators render one of their favorite series, they might be busy with that task for a considerable period of time, and might even see the publication of another title of the series before they have completed work on the current one. In contrast, an average film lasts approximately 90 minutes, and its translation is not that time-consuming a task. Nevertheless, if amateur or fan translators of motion pictures translated only those series they liked very much, and of which they were avid fans, they would not produce too many subtitles. But this is not the case. We visited www.napisy.info and chose a random user who creates subtitles; it turned out that the user created the first subtitles on 2nd September 2009 and the last ones on 10th April 2010. The user translated as many as 30 films within approximately half a year. Genre was not the decisive factor either, for the user translated comedies and science-fiction films, as well as romances and others.

Bearing in mind that the user translated films from such dissimilar genres as science-fiction and romances – to name but a few – can we truly call him or her a fansubber? And if we can, then what is he or she a fan of? It seems that a more suitable name for such translators might be funsubbers or fun translators, because they do not fit in with the above-presented definition of a fan translator of anime, or even with the modified version where fansubbers translate their favorite genres or types of films, not only anime. Funsubbers appear to be fans of translation and to have fun engaging in the very activity of subtitling films. The distinction seems to be important, for it is *funsubbers*, and not fansubbers, who attempt to achieve a more professional standard. They accept commissions for various films and hold a

number of Internet discussions whose aim is to improve the quality of their subtitles.³ [Kreb \(2011: 75\)](#) conducted a survey investigating Dutch amateur translators' rationale for creating subtitles, and it showed that approximately half of the respondents translated films because they found it pleasurable and interesting. There was also a significant group of subtitlers who wanted to improve their language skills through subtitling and who enjoyed helping others ([Kreb 2011: 38](#)). If such a considerable number of respondents are fond of translation, they might be aspiring to become professional audiovisual translators one day; if this is the case, they ought to eradicate some common errors which at times appear in their translations.

3 Fansubbers' errors

Although [Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez \(2006: 46-47\)](#) consider some fansubbers' errors – as they are viewed in this article – to be a distinctive feature developed by anime fan translators purposefully, we wish to investigate errors made by *fansubbers* from the perspective of professional subtitlers, taking into consideration the constraints and limitations imposed by this mode of translation.

3.1 Culture-specific terms

[Berdychowska \(2002: 12\)](#) is of the opinion that source language authors have a particular audience in their minds, and for whom they write their texts; consequently, such texts are likely to contain elements which are specific to the culture of this audience. They are called culture-specific concepts ([Baker 1992: 21](#)), cultural words ([Newmark 1988: 94](#)), or realia ([Robinson 1997: 222](#)). However, we shall refer to these elements as culture-specific terms in this article.

³ Fansubbers organize themselves into groups who have their own Internet websites (e.g. <http://forum.napiprojekt.pl/>) where they post their subtitles, accept commissions for almost all types of films, exchange views on translation in general and subtitling in particular, and are open to discussion. What is more, they create teams (within the groups) which separately handle translation, proofreading, editing, and technical issues. Consequently, it seems that such translators are eager to improve their qualifications in whatever way they can in order for their subtitles to become better and better.

There are two approaches to translating culture-specific terms which, although named by Venuti as late as 1995, have been used by translators for centuries – these are *domestication* and *foreignization*. Venuti states that *domestication* is "ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values bringing the author back home." (1995: 20) The opposite idea was presented by Schleiermacher in 1813, who juxtaposed it with what Venuti would later call *domestication*, which had already been widely used in translation. According to Schleiermacher, "either the translator leaves the author in peace as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him [*foreignization* – M.S.]; or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him [*domestication* – M.S.]" (Lefevere 1992: 149). Readers who wish to learn more on the subject of rendering culture-specific terms should refer, for example, to Tomaszewicz (1993: 223-227).

| Madagascar | Polish subtitles | Back-translation |
|--|---|---|
| I heard Tom Wolfe is speaking at Lincoln Center. | Podobno Tom Wolfe przemawia w Centrum Lincolna. | Seemingly, Tom Wolfe is speaking at Lincoln Center. |

Figure 1: culture-specific terms

Figure 1 presents an utterance from a scene where two monkeys are scheming to throw excrement at Tom Wolfe. If we were to ask Polish viewers who this person is, we might learn that they do not know him. As a matter of fact, he is not too well known in Poland, so if we use *foreignization* and leave the proper name as it is, we run the risk of having our viewers wondering who he is and why the monkeys wish to throw excrement exactly at him instead of following the action of the film. This is only a possibility; however, we ought to take it into account.

There appear to be at least two possible solutions to this problem. We could either neutralize the scene and replace Tom Wolfe with the name of a famous politician / journalist from the source culture – say Bill Clinton or George W. Bush (who would be suitable because he seems to be criticized and ridiculed in the USA and abroad, especially on the Internet in the form of Internet memes, thus providing the monkeys with the rationale for throwing excrement at him) – or we could *domesticate* the scene as much as possible and use the

name of a famous, and preferably controversial, politician / journalist from the target culture -- for example, Donald Tusk or Jarosław Kaczyński in the case of Poland -- and, additionally, replace Lincoln Center with a neutralized equivalent which could be encountered both in New York City, where the movie is set, and in any other city. The neutralized subtitle could be: *Podobno Bush przemawia w Centrum Lincolna* (Seemingly, Bush is speaking at Lincoln Center), whereas the domesticated one might take the form of: *Podobno Tusk przemawia w Centrum Handlu* (Seemingly, Tusk is speaking at Trade Center). We ought to remember that "Madagascar" is not based on facts; it is a cartoon and even if it is set in NYC, there seems to be no reason which might prevent Tusk from delivering a speech there, after all he may have been invited by the event organizers. That is why such changes appear to be justified if they are supposed to facilitate the reception of the film in the target market.

Cultural differences are a very difficult area of translation, and of subtitling in particular. If we change proper names and our viewers can hear the difference, they might feel cheated or confused. However, if we leave everything in the original form, they might not understand a given scene, or it might take longer for them to process such a scene. The conclusion drawn from this paragraph is that funsubbers, who have no supervisor to impose certain limitations and behaviors on them, should decide on what is more beneficial to the audience and what facilitates the watching of the film to the greatest extent and adjust our manner of rendering culture-specific terms accordingly. It must also be remembered that translators cannot domesticate films which are based on facts and set strongly in our reality because it might distort them.

3.2 Vulgarisms and swearwords

Widawski considers a good translation to be one which is in the spirit of the original (in Łupak 2009). The target audience should feel about a particular film the same way the source audience does – this also includes swearwords and vulgarisms. If they appear in the source text, they should be rendered precisely in the translation. Nevertheless, in practice translators are limited in their use of foul language. In Poland the directive of the National Broadcasting Council (KRRiTV) and the Polish Language Act have been adopted to prevent

the vulgarization of the language. That is why translators tend to avoid using foul language altogether or replace it with less vulgar expressions.

| Madagascar | Polish subtitles | Back-translation |
|--|----------------------------------|--|
| He may be a pain in the butt at times... | Facet bywa jak wrzód na dupie... | The guy is sometimes like a pain in the ass... |

Figure 2: vulgarisms and swearwords

The scene where the sentence from Figure 2 is uttered shows Marty the zebra complaining about Alex the lion. Normally professional translators smooth the language of the original due to legal limitations and the expectations of their commissioners, but here we have the opposite. The translator made the expression more vulgar than it is in the original. Taking into account that this is a cartoon whose main audience consists of children, we should take additional care while translating. Even the original uses the less vulgar 'butt,' but the subtitle replaces it with 'ass,' which in this situation is rather inappropriate. If we wanted to be faithful to the original level of vulgarity, we could render the subtitle as: *Czasem jest jak wrzód na tyłku* (He is sometimes like a pain in the butt). However, we might also decide to lower the level of vulgarity of the original because of the intended audience, and the subtitle could become: *Czasem jest strasznie upierdliwy* (He is sometimes a real nuisance).

Vulgarisms and swearwords are a very touchy area of translation. On the one hand, viewers do not like being "cheated" by translators, and ridicule all instances of translating, for example, 'fuck' as *cholera* (damn it). On the other hand, however, it appears that they can sometimes accept vulgarity in a foreign language whereas the same in their own is unacceptable. As for funsubbers, they seem to be free to choose their own manner of rendering foul language because they are not constrained by commissioners and they do not seem to be too much concerned about the law – in fact the very process of funsubbing is legally dubious. Nonetheless, if they wish to become professional subtitlers, they might deem it wise to translate the same way professionals do.

3.3 Rhymes

In order to account for the issue of rhymes in subtitles, two notions could be helpful – these are *formal equivalence* and *dynamic equivalence*. They were both advanced by Nida (1964). The former consists in rendering words and phrases almost literally⁴, taking care to follow the source language forms as closely as possible, whereas the latter means that "the message of the original text has been so transposed into the receptor language that the response of the receptor is essentially like that of the original receptors" (Nida and Taber 1969: 200), so it is to a greater or lesser extent what Widawski asserted above.

| Van Wilder | Polish subtitles | Back-translation |
|----------------------------------|---|---|
| Don't be a fool, wrap your tool. | Nie bądź głupi, dbaj o swojego członka. | Don't be stupid, take care of your penis. |

Figure 3: rhymes

Here we have a scene where Van tries to help a friend who has a problem with his penis. He gives the friend some medicine and bids him farewell uttering the sentence from Figure 3. If we look at the translation superficially, we can see that it does convey a similar message to the original. Nevertheless, there are two problems which call for our attention, namely the lack of rhyme and the change of register. First of all, the funsubber changed 'tool,' which is an informal equivalent of penis, into the actual 'penis,' which is ranked higher as far as the level of formality is concerned. To correct this situation, we could propose: *Nie bądź głupi, dbaj o swój sprzęt* (Don't be stupid, take care of your stuff). However, even in the corrected subtitle, there is no rhyme whatsoever. It appears that in this situation we ought to prepare a translation which both rhymes and does not change the register. One of the possible solutions might be: *Nie bądź pała, ubierz generała* (literally: Don't be a dimwit, dress your general).

Having analyzed an instance of rhymes in translation, we can come back to our discussion of *formal* and *dynamic equivalence*. Which is better for rendering rhymes? Is it better to render

⁴ For differences between literal translation and formal equivalence, see Hatim and Munday (2004).

the words and the meaning – depriving the translation of the rhyme – or is it better to somewhat change the meaning, but include the rhyme? It seems that poems and poetry are where rhymes are found most frequently. And when it comes to poetry, professional translators attempt to convey the general thought and aesthetic effect of a particular poem rather than all of its words. To sum up, if there is a rhyme in the text, it is likely to be there for a reason, and our task as subtitlers is to make the target language audience enjoy the rhyme effect the same way as the source language audience does, or at least compensate for it in a different scene.

3.4 Deliberate errors

Since nowadays the world is said to be a global village, there are more and more individuals who speak several languages. Unfortunately, not all of these languages are completely mastered, and that is why every now and again errors appear. This situation is also reflected in the film industry, where producers and screenwriters purposefully create characters who make a great number of language errors, which becomes their distinctive feature throughout the entire motion picture. Translators of dubbing and voice-over are in a better situation because they can just mirror errors in their translation in one way or another and viewers will hear them uttered by professional actors or readers. Subtitlers have a harder nut to crack though.

| Team America | Polish subtitles | Back-translation |
|--|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Harro, great to see you again Hans. | Miło cię znowu widzieć, Hans. | Nice to see you again Hans. |

Figure 4: deliberate errors

Figure 4 presents a scene where the most dangerous terrorist in the world greets one of his friends and has a speech impediment. The producers of "Team America" decided that this character will not speak English flawlessly but rather pronounce an *r* instead of an *l*, which is a characteristic feature of Japanese and Koreans when speaking English as their second

language⁵. If we wish to render all the lines uttered by this character accurately, we should make similar errors in our subtitles; however, it does not mean that the errors must appear in exactly the same places as the original errors do. We ought to be consistent in making these purposeful errors throughout the entire film. Polish speakers sometimes find it difficult to pronounce an *r* and instead they produce an *ł*. Consequently, our subtitle could take the form of: *Dzień doły, miło cię znowu widzieć* (Good day, nice to see you again).

Errors, whether lexical, grammatical or phonological ones, constitute a problem for funsubbers because, on the one hand, the audience might find it difficult to read subtitles full of errors – even deliberate ones. Nevertheless, on the other hand, by correcting the original, we prevent our viewers from discovering the true nature of a given character, and from interpreting the film in the same manner as the source language viewers do, which should be of paramount importance to all translators.

3.5 Idioms

Idioms belong to particular speech communities, and consequently depend on the background of these communities. What is more, they do not necessarily have any equivalents in other languages. The meaning of an idiom very frequently has nothing in common with the denotations of individual words, so even if we add denotations of all the words of a given idiom, we are not likely to guess its final meaning.

| Bruce Almighty | Polish subtitles | Back-translation |
|---|------------------------------------|---|
| And that's the way the cookie crumbles. | I tym sposobem ciastko się kruszy. | And that's the way the cookie crumbles. |

Figure 5: idioms

In this example, Bruce gives an account of an attempt to bake the largest cookie in the world; at the end he finishes the report with the idiom presented in Figure 5. As we can see, the subtitle back-translates flawlessly into English; the problem is that it should not. Since the

⁵ We wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

individual denotations do not equal the meaning of the entire idiom, the back-translation from Polish ought to be *different* from its original. The conclusion is that the idiom has been translated verbatim, which very often is the worst choice the subtitler could make because – for the above-mentioned reasons – idioms must not be handled as ordinary phrases and rendered literally. More often than not, the result of translating idioms literally will be disastrous – as is the case with the Polish subtitle, which does not mean anything and is confusing for the audience. The translation of the idiom presented above is *I tak to już bywa* (And that's the way it is). However, it does not preserve the ambiguity of the scene, where we can see the attempt to bake the largest cookie in the world. Therefore, we can either disregard the wordplay and compensate for it later on, or we can try to think of a translation containing the word 'cookie' or a similar one which would invoke the conceptual frame of baking. We can render it, for example, as *I tak to już z ciastkami bywa* (And that's the way it is with cookies), but we must be aware that the idiom is used several times throughout the film in various situations, and we will be required to adjust our subtitles accordingly.

Idioms often constitute pitfalls for translators because if they do not identify a particular phrase as an idiom and translate it verbatim, the viewers might be confused – for the translation will not make any sense in their language. When handling idioms, we can either use idiomatic expressions from the target language which are similar in meaning and form to the original idiom, or we can utilize idioms whose resemblance is limited only to meaning but not form, or it is possible to paraphrase the original, or alternatively we could omit the problematic expression altogether (Baker 1992: 71-78).

3.6 Mother tongue

On the face of it, this appears to be a trivial matter – for how can a native user of a particular language, who has been speaking it all his or her life, not know this language perfectly? Yet it sometimes happens that funsubbers are so focused on the source language that they forget about their mother tongue to some extent and inadvertently give it the feel of a translation by transferring the rules of the former. An even worse situation is when translators make

orthographical or grammatical errors which are solely the result of lack of knowledge on their part and which are likely to be easily spotted and ridiculed by their audience.

| Tim Burton's Corpse Bride | Polish subtitles | Back-translation |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Tim Burton's Corpse Bride | Gnijąca Panna Młoda Tim'a Burton'a | Tim Burton's Putrescent Bride |

Figure 6: mother tongue

This is the title of a film, but here we do not wish to investigate its translation as such; instead we shall look at one of the mother tongue problems (in the case of Polish), namely the inflection of proper names.⁶ It seems to be common practice among Poles to insert an apostrophe whenever they want to inflect a foreign proper name. The rules are that if a name ends with a silent grapheme, we must add an apostrophe to inflect it; the same applies when a name ends with *i*. However, if a proper name ends with a grapheme which is actually pronounced, we inflect the name without the use of an apostrophe – as should be the case with the above-presented example, which ought to take the form *Gnijąca Panna Młoda Tima Burtona*.

Even though the example presented above comes from the Polish language, it might be reasonable to assume that the majority of translators – after hours of balancing on the verge of at least two languages – might tend to create hybrid and confusing translations at times. It should come as no surprise that translators are just human beings and this is the reason why they make errors. It is important, however, to prevent errors from occurring, by using dictionaries, asking other people for help, double-checking the translation, etc.

3.7 Irrelevant verbiage

Certain expressions used in spoken discourse do not contain any relevant information. Consequently, their translation as subtitles appears to be highly disputable. These

⁶ Readers who wish to learn more on title translation for the film industry are encouraged to read Berezowski (2004).

expressions will be referred to as irrelevant verbiage in this article. We ought to remember that the lack of translation of irrelevant verbiage is not the result of translators being lazy or unable to render it correctly; industry practice does not allow for expressions containing irrelevant verbiage to be subtitled because they are usually clearly understood from context and co-text – we must bear in mind that viewers interpret films aurally as well as visually.

| You don't mess with the Zohan | Polish subtitles |
|-------------------------------|------------------|
| - Zohan | - Zohan |
| - Dalia | - Dalia |

Figure 7: irrelevant verbiage

Although names are very important, we should remember that they are heard by the viewers, so there seems to be no particular reason to repeat what can already be heard (unless the names are uttered for the first time). By rendering Zohan as Zohan, we simply compel our viewers to read the subtitle and we distract their attention, which is contradictory to the first principle of subtitles: that they should guide the audience through the film ([Belczyk 2007: 10-12](#)), not convey every single utterance, sound, etc. Following the preceding reasoning, it ought to be stated that the correct translation for the above-presented example would be no translation at all.

On the one hand, subtitles guide our audience through films and assist them in understanding motion pictures, but on the other hand, every line of text distracts our viewers from watching, and makes them change the focus of their attention. That is why subtitlers ought to limit the interference of subtitles to the absolute minimum. Subtitles should be rendered in such a way that they convey only the core meaning, thus guiding the viewers and allowing them to draw their own conclusions from what they can see and hear.

4 Technical limitations

There appears to be no complete unanimity among audiovisual translation theorists and practitioners as to how many characters one subtitle line ought to comprise. Whereas Adamowicz-Grzyb ([2010: 16](#)) claims that there are usually from 35 to 38 characters, Belczyk

(2007: 13) opts for not more than 36-38 characters, and Karamitroglou (1998) allows for approximately 35 characters, specifying that it would be unreasonable to create a subtitle line of more than 40 characters. What is more, Adamowicz-Grzyb (2010: 16) contends that nowadays the human eye requires less time to process a particular communication due to the fact that we watch a considerable number of short, dynamic advertisements. It follows that a safe limit for a subtitler is a maximum of 40 characters. Although the character number is not completely agreed upon, the number of lines displayed at a time seems to be an uncontested matter. All of the above three authors unanimously state that audiovisual translators cannot create subtitles of more than two lines. Furthermore, both subtitle lines should normally be positioned at the bottom of the screen, where they will occupy an area of lesser importance to the viewer. We must also remember that subtitles cannot be displayed for a duration of less than one or more than six or seven seconds. Moreover, two consecutive subtitles cannot appear one right after another. There should be an interval of approximately 1/4 of a second so that the viewer's eye can perceive the change of subtitles.

5 Conclusions

In this article, we have discussed selected errors frequently made by amateur subtitlers, and their possible solutions.

As far as the issues discussed in this paper are concerned, all but one of them could be categorized into the typology of translation errors presented by Hejwowski (2004: 124-149). He distinguishes between errors of syntagmatic translation (i.e. our problems with idioms), misinterpretation errors (i.e. deliberate mistakes which are corrected by funsubbers), realization errors (i.e. culture-specific terms where funsubbers might wrongly evaluate the target viewers' knowledge, or mother tongue difficulties), and meta-translation errors (i.e. changing the register in case of vulgarisms and swearwords, or a wrong choice of translation techniques in the case of rendering rhyme). What we are left with are errors consisting in translating irrelevant verbiage which do not seem to match any of the error types posited by Hejwowski; thus, we wish to propose a fifth type of translation error, namely medium-related errors. These would include, for example, irrelevant verbiage and also the rendering

of vulgarisms in the case of subtitling; too long or too short texts not allowing for lip-synchronization in the case of dubbing; and deleting parts of the source code in the case of video game or computer software translation.

In order to prevent these errors from occurring, translators should be acquainted with the medium with which they are working. To give but an example, they ought to know that they must not create subtitles of more than 40 characters for the film industry; nevertheless, it is usually perfectly acceptable to do so when translating video games.

We share Bogucki's opinion that the lack of professional dialogue scripts is a great problem for funsubbers (2009: 56), and it seems unlikely to be overcome due to the dubious legal status of this type of translation. However, we also believe that – barring the legal issues – making amateur subtitles might prove to be an excellent exercise for those who want to become professional film translators, and more research into this area might contribute to better quality funsubs. It might also be beneficial for universities to enter into agreements with film distributors and assign students the task to create subtitles for old and / or inexpensive films. The end result might be the transformation of some gifted funsubbers into professionals ready to provide good quality translations for the film industry.

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