

TRANSLATION OF TITLES OF FILMS. A CRITICAL APPROACH

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Original titles of films are not always literally translated into Spanish or Catalan. The aim of this paper is to account for the various criteria that are followed in dealing with the titles of foreign films. The method we used to analyse the problems involved in translating film titles was mainly a collection and classification of data. We selected three hundred titles from specialized literature and then we studied their translations from a critical perspective.

We noticed that some titles are left untranslated either because they are already famous in the source language or simply because they are believed to sound more commercial than any target language version. Examples of this are "West Side Story", "My Fair Lady", "Dirty Dancing" or "Ghost", which were not translated into Spanish or Catalan. Most titles involving proper nouns appear in Spanish without any change from the original: e.g. "Johnny Guitar", "Ben-Hur" or "Metropolis". Nevertheless, "Frankenstein" was translated as "El Doctor Frankenstein" and "Dragonwyck" as "El Castillo de Dragonwyck". This tendency to maintain the English original nouns on some occasions and to expand them on others is a sign of inconsistency on the part of film distributors, who are not consistent in their criteria when translating titles of films.

Literal translations are not usual, and most titles are partially or entirely changed when the film is distributed in Spain. A faithful, literal translation is preferable if it works in the target language, that is, if it is as shocking or conveys the same connotations as the original title. But this is not always possible. Sometimes there are linguistic difficulties, socio-cultural differences or commercial interests, among other factors, that condition the process of translation. Titles such as "Greed" ("Avaricia") or "42nd Street" ("La Calle 42") were literally translated because the result was commercially attractive. However, in the case of "Dance, Fools, Dance" ("Danzad, Danzad, Malditos") or "The Rose Tattoo" ("La Rosa Tatuada"), the versions are fairly literal, but some changes had to be introduced in order to adapt the titles to the target language. First, "fools" was translated as "malditos" instead of "tontos" or "imbéciles" which is more faithful to the pragmatic effect of the expression, while the grammatical difference in "La Rosa Tatuada" is intended to make the title sound more natural in Spanish.

A cultural equivalent is often used. Two examples of this would be "Witness for the Prosecution" ("Testigo de Cargo") and "Mo'Money" ("Más Pelas"). In the first case the Spanish version offers the cultural equivalent of "witness for the prosecution" instead of translating it as "testigo de la fiscalía" to make the title sound more appealing and natural. The colloquial expression "Mo'Money", has been translated into Spanish without losing its colloquialism or changing its lexical arrangement.

Apart from translations where most of the words are more or less literally rendered there are titles that are completely changed when they are introduced in Spain, because, as we have already said, they involve certain specific difficulties. "The Ladykillers", for instance, was translated into Spanish as "El Quinteto de la Muerte" probably due to a misinterpretation of the word "ladykiller", which does not refer to a man who kills women but to a man who is believed to charm and conquer all of the women he meets to later on abandon them. "Fade to Black", which appeared in Spain as "Fundido en Negro" was mistranslated because of the difficulty in finding an equivalent for "fade to". The "sinister mind" that Julio César Santoyo mentions in *El Delito de Traducir* (Santoyo, 1989:139) as being responsible for a great deal of doubtful translations was quite happy to render "fade to" as "fundido en", which has nothing to do with the original. These two examples have to do with interlinguistic difficulties due to a lack of ready one-to-one equivalents. In other cases the linguistic problems that titles of films pose to the people in charge of their translations are due to semantic connotations that are difficult to compensate for in the target language or to the fact that they contain phrasal verbs, idioms or colloquialisms difficult to translate. This is the case of "Prick Up Your Ears". We read in the dictionary, "if you prick up your ears you listen eagerly when you suddenly hear an interesting sound or an important piece of information" (*Collins Cobuild*, 1987:1138). An exact translation of this title is only possible by paraphrasing it, which would not produce an effective title in Spanish. The title in Spain, "Ábrete de Orejas", can be commercial to a certain extent but it is not grammatically correct or meaningful. Translators succeed in solving linguistic difficulties on some occasions. A good example is the Spanish title for the film "The Rescuers Down Under" ("Los Rescatadores en Cangurolandia"). "Down Under" is a colloquial expression to refer to Australia and New Zealand and as there is no colloquial equivalent for that term in Spanish, the translator invented the word "Cangurolandia", which, apart from implying fantasy, also suggests that its use is colloquial. We might consider this translation successful because it creates the same expectations as the English title; other titles, however, lose their informal, colloquial tone when translated. "My Gal Sal", for instance, was translated as "Mi Chica Favorita" because it was difficult to maintain in Spanish the humour and informality of "gal" (=girl) and "Sal" (=Sally). "Barfly" also illustrates the problem of translating colloquialisms, for it refers to a person who is always drinking, chatting or playing cards in bars. A bilingual dictionary translates this word as "culo de café", but neither this expression nor the literal "mosca de bar" is a recurrent image in Spanish, therefore it was translated as "El Borracho". This title does not convey informality or humour as the original title does; however, as there is no image in Spanish to correspond to "barfly", we should say it was a valid commercial title validated by the contents of the film.

Idioms and features of the source language or culture, as we have already said, are a source of difficulty because it is not always possible to find an equivalent idiomatic

expression in the target language for the English original. "Kid Millions", for instance, is a title that is impossible to translate literally while maintaining its connotations, as it is a special name like "Jack Frost", "John Bull" or "Uncle Sam". In Spain the film was called "El Chico Millonario", which reflects the meaning of the original title but does not convey its informality and humour.

Our research revealed that very often commercial interests go as far as to entirely forget the linguistic meaning of the original title for the sake of one that will "sell" the film better. Most of the films we analysed were translated according to commercial premises, trying to satisfy the different tastes of the audience. Film distributing companies use several strategies in order to make titles sound more appealing to the general public and attract a larger audience. These strategies can be considered as "commercial traps". We observed four luring features in our analysis: romance or sex, morbidity, adventure and humour. In the first group we could include titles such as "You'll Never Get Rich", which appeared in Spain as "Desde Aquel Beso", or "The Enchanted Cottage", that was translated as "Su Milagro de Amor". Morbidity is used to catch the audience's interest in the translations of titles such as "China Girl" ("Infierno en la Tierra"), "The Bottom of the Bottle" ("Barreras de Orgullo"), etc. The audience is sometimes attracted by a title that sounds adventurous, intrepid or daring. Some examples of this tendency are: "Sweet Smell of Success" ("Chantaje en Broadway"), "Home from the Hill" ("Con El Llegó el Escándalo") and "Backfire" ("Ambición Mortal"). Another strategy used to attract the audience is to translate the original title making it sound crafty, humorous or "naughty". This would be the case of translations such as "Amor en Conserva", originally called "Love Happy" and "Loca Academia de Combate", which in the English version appeared as "Combat High".

The fact that some film titles include socio-cultural markers makes socio-cultural differences another reason why literal translations sometimes are avoided. By socio-cultural markers we mean explicit references that may be regarded as assumed knowledge of the audience to which the film is addressed. Some of these markers would not be recognised by a foreign audience if they appeared in a literal translation of the titles and would consequently make them less appealing. We have observed several examples of this but we are going to mention only three. Firstly, the film "His Girl Friday" was translated as "Luna Nueva" due to the lack of an equivalent in Spanish for "girl Friday". In English this expression is used to refer to a female secretary or helper in an office, who does all the important jobs that the boss wants done. As there is no colloquial expression in Spanish to account for the term, the film appeared with a more suggestive title that was completely different from the original. Secondly, "North by Nort-West", the American film which was shown in Spain as "Con la Muerte en los Talones", makes an explicit reference to motorways in the U.S., which, literally translated would mean nothing to the Spanish audience. The reason for this is that in Spain motorways are named with letters and numbers (A-2, A-7, M-30...) and a title such as "Al Norte por la Noroeste" would not be readily comprehensible¹. Thirdly, another title difficult to translate because of socio-cultural differences is "Father Goose". This title makes an ironic reference to "Mother Goose", an old well-known nursery rhyme. Nobody would recognise the irony in a literal translation of the title, "El Padre Ganso", and it could not be translated using a Spanish cultural equivalent because there is no

¹ This idea was given to us by Pere Gallardo, from the University of Lleida

nursery rhyme as widely known as "Mother Goose" is in England. That is why the film was called "Operación Whisky", a title that has to do with its plot.

When we observe how titles of films are translated we sometimes notice a clear moralising intention on the part of the translator. On some occasions it is because of political reasons while on others the justification is based on socio-cultural factors. In the first case, we include those titles which would not be accepted by Franco's regime (1939-1975), whereas regarding the present Spanish socio-cultural context we have to take into account the fact that certain words are considered taboo and thus not acceptable in the title of a film. For instance, the translation of "Let's Make Love" as "El Multimillonario" illustrates a moralising tendency of the political regime in Spain in the 1960s, so a title such as "Hagamos el Amor" would have been considered as immoral, and even politically dangerous. "Kiss and Make-Up" appeared in Spain as "El Templo de las Hermosas", a title which has nothing to do with the original, because "beso" was considered a taboo word in that period. In the same way, "Lust for Life" was translated as "El Loco del Pelo Rojo". The reason was that "lust" has sexual connotations and the Spanish audience would not be allowed to read a title such as "Deseo Sexual por la Vida". Probably nowadays these films would be translated in a more faithful way if we take into account literal translations such as "La Puta" (originally "The Whore" or Spanish films such as "¿Por Qué lo Lllaman Amor Cuando Quiere Decir Sexo?"). Another example of this tendency was "El Último Chantaje", that was as moralising as demoralising as the original "The Happy Thieves". "Welcome to Hard Times" appeared as "Una Bala para el Diablo". Firstly, the regime could not accept a translation like "Bienvenidos a los Tiempos Dificiles" because the public might find the title fitting to their own context. Secondly, the Spanish version has a clear moralising tone in accordance with the ideology of the regime, which was very strict in religious matters.

It is also interesting to pay attention to the Catalan translations of films. Most films offered by the public channel TV3 have Catalan titles. However, this channel has been rightly accused of translating the titles from the Spanish versions and not directly from the original titles. As a result, the titles of these films are translations of translations. Two examples of this "technique" are:

"Gone with the Wind" - "Lo que el Viento se Llevó" - "Allò que el Vent s'Endugué"
 "Stripes" - "El Pelotón Chiflado" - "Una Legió de Guillats"

In the first example it is easy to see that the Catalan version is literally translated from the Spanish one instead of from the original title. We would suggest that "S'ho va Endur el Vent" would sound much more natural than "Allò que el Vent s'Endugué". In "Stripes" there is a socio-cultural gap because "stripes" refers to the American flag and at the same time it is a military term. Since this cannot be conveyed in Spanish, the translators decided to change the title and to call it "El Pelotón Chiflado". In this way the Catalan translators did not attempt to solve socio-cultural differences by themselves, they just translated from the Spanish title, which, unfortunately happens very often. However, TV3 is not unique in this respect. Recently, many film distributing companies offer the same film in two versions, Catalan and Spanish. Again, the Catalan titles are often mere translations of the Spanish ones. This is the case of "Switch". This "switch" refers to the transformation that is undergone by the main character of the film, who switches from male to female. This irony cannot be conveyed in a single word in Spanish,

so, they created a new title, "Una Rubia Muy Dudosa". The Catalan version was "Una Rossa Molt Dubtosa", an imitation of the Spanish solution. A couple of years ago TV3 attempted to solve this problem by organising a competition which consisted in asking people to provide a title for the film "Some Like it Hot", which does not sound very appealing if translated literally. The winning title was "Ningú no És Perfecte" (Nobody is Perfect), a sentence repeated several times in the film. So, TV3 chose an alternative to a literal translation of the Spanish title "Con Faldas y a lo Loco". Unfortunately, TV3 cannot organise a competition every time a difficult title must be translated. On the other hand, in "La Vanguardia" that appeared on February the 25th, 1993, there was a complaint about the fact that TV3 had shown the film "Man, Woman and Child" with two different titles, "El Fill de l'Altra" (last February) and "Home, Dona i Nen" (last year). The latter is a literal version whereas the former is a freer one. We suggest that the reason for this is to hide the fact that TV3 offers the same films several times. However, we think that this undesirable situation was caused by this channel's unclear policy for translating film titles. That is to say, they rarely follow the same criteria. It also means that TV3 did not understand the importance of producing its own recognised translations. The following title is also an example of this:

"A Dry, White Season" - "Una Árida Estación Blanca" - "Jo Blanc, Tu Negre"

In this case, the Spanish version is a literal translation of the English title. The Catalan version, however, is a new title. This contrasts with the policy mentioned before in which Catalan titles were translated from Spanish ones.

"Uno de nuestros vicios nacionales a lo largo de este siglo ha sido el de trastocar los nombres de prácticamente todos los filmes que llegaban de allende las fronteras. Debe haber alguna mente siniestra, tras algún despacho y sillón responsable, que se pasa la vida cambiando por sistema los nombres que traen consigo los celuloideos anglosajones, franceses, alemanes o italianos" (Santoyo 1989:139)

This passage from *El Delito de Traducir* reflects the general opinion about translations of film titles. This area of translation has been widely criticised for being inconsistent and inaccurate. However, we should take into account the problems involved in this kind of translations. A major factor is that these translations are rarely done by professionals since the translators of the film can suggest the title in Spanish, but the distributors are the ones who make the final decision. Nevertheless, after our analysis we reached the conclusion that these criteria are not clearly defined. The same problem is not always solved in the same way, which is a considerable weakness. These inconsistencies may lead to problems such as incomprehensible translations or the confusion of the audience. By "confusion" we mean that one cannot rely on the Spanish title of a film to guess what the film is about. Also, too often the audience leaves the cinema wondering why the distributor has chosen "that" title for "that" film when the two clearly do not go together. We would like to conclude by suggesting that the people who translate titles of films become consistent in their criteria and strategies. This would solve many of the problems we have discussed in this paper.

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RESUM

La traducció dels títols de pel·lícula. Aproximació crítica.

L'objectiu d'aquest article és esbrinar per què els títols originals de les pel·lícules no són traduïts literalment al català o al castellà. Per tal d'acomplir el nostre propòsit hem recollit tres-cents títols de pel·lícules i hem provat de classificar-los segons el criteri seguits en la seva traducció. Primer de tot, hem observat un grup de títols que restaven intraduïts, és a dir, es mantenia l'original en anglès. Dins aquest grup hem distingit entre aquells títols que consistien en un nom propi i aquells que no. En segon lloc, hem analitzat un grup de títols que havien estat traduïts de manera lliure. Hem intentat descobrir les causes d'aquestes traduccions lliures i hem trobat que es podien resumir en quatre punts: dificultats lingüístiques, interessos comercials, diferències socio-culturals i, per últim, les possibles intencions moralitzadores per part d'alguns traductors. A més, hem afegit uns comentaris sobre la política que es segueix a Catalunya en aquest camp de la traducció. Després d'aquesta anàlisi, hem arribat a la conclusió que quan es tradueixen títols de pel·lícules no se segueixen sempre els mateixos criteris, cosa que pot dur a incoherències i confusions.

SUMMARY

The aim of this article is to find out the reasons why original titles of films are not always literally translated into Spanish or Catalan. To do this, we selected three hundred titles of films and we tried to classify them according to the criteria that had been followed when they were translated. Firstly, we observed a group of films the titles of which remain untouched. Secondly, we found a group of titles which are literally translated. Thirdly, the largest group is that in which titles are translated freely. We tried to identify and classify the causes and nature of free translations and we found four factors: linguistic difficulties, commercial interests, socio-cultural differences and the moralising intentions of the translator. We have also commented on the policy followed in Catalonia as far as the translation of titles of films is concerned. After this analysis, we reached the conclusion that no clear criteria are followed in this field of translation, which may lead to inconsistencies and inaccuracies.