

Shun the Pun, Rescue the Rhyme? The Dubbing and Subtitling of Language-Play in Film

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ABSTRACT

Language-play can briefly be described as the wilful manipulation of the peculiarities of a linguistic system in a way that draws attention to these peculiarities themselves, thereby causing a communicative and cognitive effect that goes beyond the conveyance of propositional meaning. Among the various phenomena answering this description are the different kinds of puns, but also more strictly form-based manipulations such as rhymes and alliteration, in addition to a host of other, sometimes even fuzzier, subcategories.

Due to its unusual nature, and especially its frequently strong dependence on the idiosyncrasies of a particular language, language-play can generally be assumed to constitute a significant challenge in a translation context. Furthermore, given its non-negligible effects, the translator is not free to simply ignore the language-play (provided it has been recognized as such in the first place) without having taken an active stance on its treatment. However, the difficulties in finding a suitable target-language solution are possibly exacerbated if the source text is a complex multimedia product such as a film, the translation of which, normally in the form of dubbing or subtitling, is subject to additional constraints.

In view of these intricacies, it has been the aim of this study to analyze and measure how language-play in film has actually been treated in authentic dubbing and subtitle versions. As a prerequisite, the concept of language-play has been elaborated on, and more than a dozen subcategories have been described, developed, and employed. For the purpose of carrying out a meaningful analysis of the dubbing and subtitling of language-play, a corpus has been compiled, comprising 18 family films and 99 of their various target versions, most on DVD, and yielding nearly 800 source-text instances of language-play and thousands of translation solutions.

The results indicate that especially two sets of factors, among the many that are likely to influence a translation, play a prominent role: the type of language-play, and the identity and working conditions of the translator. By contrast, the mode of translation (dubbing vs. subtitling), the target language, or the general properties of the films could not be shown to have a sizeable impact.

KEYWORDS: alliteration, compensation, dubbing, family films, foreign words, half-rhymes, humour, idioms, language-play, metaphors, modified expressions, nonce formations, puns, repetition, rhymes, screen translation, similes, subtitling, wordplay.

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