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The Ethics of Translation: The Changing Responsibilities of Norwegian Dubbing

Bachelor's project in Lektorutdanning i Språkfag for trinn 8-13

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1.0 Introduction

For a long time, the discourse of translation ethics has largely been dedicated to addressing the professional culture and norms that constitute ‘good’ translations, but there is no consensus on what constitutes an ethical approach to translation. Some value fidelity to the source material, while other highlight translator’s role of mediators of transcultural awareness. The expanding subfield that is audiovisual translation has received a great deal of attention since the 1970’s, but in a society where audiovisual media is growing at an exceptional rate, there might be cause for a proportional increase in attention given to this domain’s ethical discourse. Supplemented by my own experiences as a dubbing-translator, I will discuss some relevant theories in order to highlight the changing ethical responsibilities of dubbing-translation for a younger audience, and how this is affected by the expanding industry. As a way of emphasizing the practical aspect of the subject I will discuss how translating swearing can present an ethical issue. When discussing the ethics of translation, it is important to realize that it is just as subjective a field as any other discourse on ethics. There is no universally accepted standard that reigns over the field, nor is that necessarily the goal. As Koskinen states: “It is often more important to raise important issues and open up different viewpoints” (2016 : 171). In order to convey a meaningful insight in this paper, I have to limit the scope to a surmountable number of advocates. The theoretical framework for this paper will revolve around ethical approaches written by Anthony Pym, supplemented by Abdullah and Koskinen’s insights on the conditions in which translators operate. When referring to practical examples within dubbing, I will use the integrated model of signifying codes developed by Frederic Chaume (2004 : 13, 16).

2.0 Theories on translation ethics

2.1 Anthony Pym – Intercultural mediation

For many, the 1990’s marked a distinct shift in the dialogue regarding the ethics of translation. Among the prominent contributors was Anthony Pym, with his book *On Translation Ethics* (1997). In it, he highlights the issue of linking translation theory with practice and contributes to a shift in the discourse from focusing on the translation, to the translator. (Koskinen 2016 : 171)

He strongly discourages monocultural approaches to translation; a school of thought which he considered promoting a false idea of the translator as a gatekeeper and protector of language and culture. (Pym 2012 : 3) Rather, he suggested that the role of the translator must be staunchly imbedded in the space that exists between cultures.

The most emphasized values in Pym are awareness of the translator's role as a mediator of trans-cultural understanding, and the translator's responsibility to himself and his profession, summed up in these five principles:

1. Translators are responsible for their product as soon as they accept to produce it.
2. Translators are responsible for the probable effects of their translations.
3. Translator Ethics need not involve deciding between two cultures.
4. Transaction costs should not exceed the total benefits ensuing from the corresponding cooperative interaction.
5. Translators, insofar as they are more than simple messengers, are responsible for the capacity of their work to contribute to long-term stable, cross-cultural cooperation. (Pym 2012 :166)

As noted, Pym has a particular in “why” one should translate, rather than “how”, and the responsibility one accepts with the act of translation. This small alteration serves to direct the issue away from a dualistic approach, encouraging greater ethical reflection. In addition to his emphasis on the translator (rather than the translation), these principles also demonstrate Pym's ideas regarding the relationship between ethics and professionalism, constituting a call for established codes that support altruistic alterity in a social or cultural setting. This is referred to as deontology (Baker 2020 : 162). Despite his translational idealism, Pym makes clear that he understands the cultural, nationalistic and financial factors that influence the discourse. Although progressive at the time, Pym's deontological approach is less relevant than some later theories in understanding the working conditions of the modern translator, due to the rapidly developing nature of the industry.

2.3 Abdullah and Koskinen – The working conditions

The discourse of deontological focus was elaborated further by Koskinen and Abdullah (2008), but they go beyond Pym in addressing the specific impact the ‘industrial revolution’

within translation has had upon the associated ethics. Based on the network theories of Albert-Lászlo Barabási they outline a thorough insight in the practical repercussions technological and economical changes have imparted upon the professional environment. This outline provides an account of the paradigm shift from a traditional, vertical translator-client relationship, into a horizontal network, in which the translator is separated from the client by up to several links. An important consequence of this development is related to the issue of trust. Like Chesterman and Pym, Koskinen and Abdallah emphasizes the importance of trust in translation, specifically that between the client and the translator, and suggest that trust is essential in tying together the emergent, more complex networks that have overtaken the industry (Abdallah & Koskinen 2008). Given its importance, trust is valued highly in such an approach – not only in an ethical sense, but also financially. As such, the translators are considered assets, and treated accordingly, but in what sense? Abdallah and Koskinen (2008) present an industry in which the “translators are [now] facing turbulence and falling victim to their own industrial revolution”. They suggest that this may be a consequence of the weakness in the network-model that has absorbed professional translation; the outstretched chains of communication have left them vulnerable, and unable to include, inform and maintain their (often sub-contracted) employees. They also argue that the transition from a horizontal to a vertical trust relationship is asymmetric in matters of financial risk, leaving the weaker party (the translator) more exposed, straining the trust further.

The lack of trust, and subsequently loyalty, is not an isolated issue however, and related detrimental effects are spreading within the industry. In interviews with Finnish translators, Abdallah and Koskinen reveal anger and frustration over unreasonable workloads, decreasing salaries, and lack of agency. As Pym stated in his principles: “Transaction costs should not exceed the total benefits ensuing from the corresponding cooperative interaction” (2012 :166). If we accept the premise that an effective working relationship built on trust and loyalty is an expression of financial capital, it stands to reason that exploitation of such a relationship for financial gain would be a short-term investment. Not only will such policies affect the network’s ability to maintain working relations with competent translators, it will also affect the quality of their products – both of which will be harmful to the network’s reputation. Abdallah & Koskinen suggest that this might be the case, but that it is the responsibility of research to conduct critical translation studies to encourage change (2008).

2.4 The influence of dubbing

Before further discussion of the ethical role of the translator, one should consider the impact of the translations themselves. Studies performed on the pedagogical value of audiovisual translations have yielded positive results, but they are mainly concerned with subtitling (McLoughlin & Jertola 2014). Moreover, many of them are preoccupied with the results of directed attempts at pedagogical practice, while neglecting the more passive role that exposure to dubbed media can play. The prevalent form of audiovisual translations in Norway is subtitling. This is often attributed to a widespread competence in English, and high literacy-levels (Baker 2008 : 18), but also the limited prospect of profit when comparing the relative small market share and the high cost of dubbing. Despite this, there is still a thriving industry for dubbing in Norway, which is primarily directed at children and young adolescents, and I suggest that dubbing is of particular ethical concern for two reasons. Firstly, several studies suggest that children are particularly susceptible to linguistic input, both lexically and syntactical (particularly when exposed to ‘new media’ without guidance) (Hoff 2002). Secondly, the nature of subtitling allows (and sometimes forces) the translator to generalize and compress the spoken dialogue, whereas dubbing must conform to expectations of duration and visual synchronization. Due to the incommensurability of languages, this presents a challenge (Chesterman 2018 : 445). Sometimes a fragment of the source text will differ greatly from its target text equivalent. The difference may be the length, visibly different lip-movement, or sonorous markings that are noticeably unnatural. Rather than breaching the planning code (Munday 2016 : 254), these kind of situations might force the translators to produce a text that is unnatural in the target languages grammar or syntax, or motivate borrowing words rather than using existing vocabulary in order to attain synchronization. In other words, dubbing might incentivize a linguistic development that is vulnerable to foreign influence. This proposal is supported by the writings Danan (1991 : 613). She discusses the correlation between countries that prefer dubbing and nationalistic policies. Similarly, she correlates preference for subtitling with weaker cultural systems that are more open to foreign influences (ibid.). Among those countries is, of course, Norway.

2.5 Misguided guidelines?

Seeing as dubbing in Norway is mostly used in children's movies and series, an aversion to swearing is to be expected. In 2014 the Language Council for the Norwegian Broadcasting Network (NRK) decided upon these guidelines:

“Vi skal unngå banning i NRK-innhold, med mindre det er viktig for historien som skal fortelles. Vi skal særlig unngå banning i innhold for barn. [We will avoid the use of swearing in content by the NRK, unless it is essential to the story being told. We will especially avoid swearing in content directed at children.]¹

My own experiences working with translating manuscripts for dubbing, and conversations with two of my colleagues, would indicate that this is a common policy among most producers and distributors of children's entertainment. Such policies make perfect sense on paper. Not only is the occurrence of swearing rare in the source texts (as they are directed towards children and young adolescents), but if it were to occur, it seems unlikely that omitting it, or replacing it with a non-offensive substitute, would entail any loss of value in the intended meaning.

However, the understanding of what qualifies as swearing is subjective. Stenström suggests defining swearing as “...’taboo words’ [...] in particular concepts related to religion, sex and excretion.” (Greenall 2011 : 50 And elaborates with “If such words are used figuratively, signaling the speaker's emotions and attitudes, they are used for swearing.” Greenall expands this definition by adding “...semantic domains which have to do with bodily parts, disease/retardation and disability, animals [...], and ethnicity or geographical provenance.” (2011 : 50) This will provide the framework in which swearing is to be understood in this text, in lieu of a universally accepted standard.

Substituting words that can be categorized as ‘mild’ swearing in English might provide a challenge to the translator when the swearing constraints are ‘too’ severe. Phrases and single words that are common utterances in English, such as “Oh my God”, “shit”, and “damn”, all have ‘natural’ counterparts in Norwegian (respectively “Herregud”, “dritt” and “Fader/faen”) that are frequently used in everyday-speech by large parts of the Norwegian population, but guidelines may prohibit the translators from making use of them. Therein lies the challenge. As

¹ <https://sprak.nrk.no/rettleiing/banning/>

Greenall (2011 :) points out, the omission of swearing (as demonstrated in the Norwegian subtitling of the movie *The Commitments*) can be a ‘good’ decision within the field of subtitling – adapting the intended message to the cultural swearing constraints of the intended audience can ensure that the swearing does not distract from the intended message. Lip-synchronized dubbing, however, does not always provide the opportunity to simply omit the utterances. To provide an example: A character in a show stubs his/her toe and responds with an angry outburst which contains a form of swearing (albeit mild). That outburst must be replaced with something, as the audience will perceive through non-verbal communication not only that the character is saying something, but that it is said in a certain manner. The option of omission is therefore unavailable to the translator, and a substitute must be found. Guidelines provided by the producers limits the vocabulary available to the translator, and often eliminates the more obvious ‘equivalents’. Rather than replacing “shit” with “dritt”, or “oh my God” with “Herregud”, the translator might opt for solutions like “huff”, “pokker”, or “Søren klype”. Such solutions are certainly viable, but whether they are accurate reflections of modern Norwegian is certainly up for debate.

In 2014, Professor in lexicology, Ruth E. Vatvedt Fjeld did a corpus-based examination of the frequency of taboo words in subtitles from the NRK over three four-year periods². The results showed that in the period 2007-2010 the usage of taboo words was eleven times higher than it had been in 2003-2006. This need not be read a clear indicator of a nationwide increase in swearing in everyday life, but such a dramatic increase in a nationalized broadcasting-network does suggest a shift in the linguistic and social codes that determine taboo words. In another study, Fjeld addresses older forms of swearing that are “*incomprehensible, or at best obscure to modern users, but [they] are still in frequent use.*” (Fekede & Fjeld, 2016). I would suggest that some of the previously mentioned words (e.g “Fader”, “faen” and “Herregud”) can be described in a similar way; they are words that (while religious, condemning, or harm-invoking in origin) have undergone a semantic ‘defusal’ as a result of cultural and societal changes. I would suggest that while many still understand the religious/blasphemous nature of these words, they use them in a sense that is separate from its etymology and should therefore not be considered (intended) challenges to the swearing constraints. If one accepts this premise, it stands to reason that one must consider whether these words (and others like them) should even be read as swearing at all.

² <https://www.sprakradet.no/Vi-og-vart/Publikasjoner/Spraaknytt/spraknytt-2014/Spraknytt-22014/Banning-pa-tv-mer-vanlig-mindre-tabu/>

Another strategy for dubbing-translators when faced with mild swearing is to substitute the word or phrase in question with a completely ‘harmless’ alternative. Common solutions might be “kjære vene”, “jøje meg” or “jøsse navn”. In regard to the societal swearing restraints, these are non-controversial alternatives, but they impose a different sort of problem. Phrases like these are arguably old-fashioned and see little use among the target audience, and by using them the translator arguably highlights their presence. Greenall suggest that an extensive breach of swearing constraints might be distracting to the audience (2011 : 56), but I would argue that the same applies to an extensive subversion of the same constraints. If one accepts Pym’s idea that the translator should inhabit the sphere between the source and target culture, then I argue that it should be considered unethical to produce an artificial substitute to adhere to societal codes that do not ‘exist’ in either culture.

Discussion 3.0

Earlier in this paper I mentioned that the lack of consensus does not derive from the value of the discourse on translation ethics. The value in the discourse lies in directing the focus toward societal gain, and in encouraging translators and researchers to act responsibly and ethically, and to serve as a positive force for societal, cultural, and political gain. In the case of Norwegian dubbing-translators, I believe there is need for heightened awareness. And part of that awareness is realizing where their loyalty lies. Pym’s position regarding translators can be read as slightly paradoxical. On the one hand he emphasizes the role of the translator and presents the ethical ideal to be that of a neutral, cross-cultural mediator. On the other hand, in encouraging loyalty to neutrality, he downplays the existence of individuality within the translator. When he discards approaches based on subjective hermeneutics, on the basis that translation cannot occur outside a process of communication (Pym 2012 : 166), he also (perhaps inadvertently) acknowledges the individuality of the translator. And the translator as an individual cannot be seen in a vacuum – one cannot have societal and cultural responsibilities without belonging to a society and a culture. As suggested by Danan (1991 : 613), we in Norway are susceptible to foreign linguistic influences. On one hand, one could argue for (in accordance with Pym’s ideals) the benefits of the cross-cultural influence we impose on our younger generation. On the other hand, we should recognize that the amount of anglophone influence our society is subject to might warrant a linguistic approach of protectionism in order to ensure that

our language remains our own, rather than being permeated in its entirety by English or American tendencies. I am not certain that the current status allows for any ‘true’ neutrality, but rather apathy in the face of linguistic subjugation through unconscious forces. This might, admittedly, be an extreme and pessimistic take on the matter.

In 2019, the media giant Netflix produced a total of 371 new series. It marked an increase of over 50% from the previous year, and surpassed the total production of TV-series in the US in 2005.³ There is no reason to suspect a decline in production any time soon, and similar trends can be observed in competitors such as HBO and Disney+, as well as other audiovisual media such as videogames. It is reasonable to assume that this industrial growth will incentivize a proportional growth in dubbed material directed at Norwegian youth, and I argue that it *should* incentivize an increased attention towards the ethical issues I have presented in this text. I base this on the previously discussed topic of loyalty. I would argue that the professional environment in which many contemporary translators work is currently in a state where they work as mercenaries, and must abandon loyalty to the author, reader and himself in order to practice his profession. This loyalty is also largely unreciprocated, as reflected in the reported loss of autonomy, agency, contact with the client and decrease in salary. (Abdallah and Koskinen 2008). Pym states that “is university theorists are on one side, and professional translators on the other, one runs the risk of a sophisticated ethics without widespread practical application, or a widespread practice unsupported by sophisticated ethics.” (2012 : 5) The current situation adheres to neither of these scenarios, but neither does it resemble the implied ideal. Rather, dubbing-translators operate in an environment in which they are severely limited from making ethical judgements – regardless of the theoretical work.

The reason I find the illustrative example of swearing to be of particular interest also ties into the concept of loyalty. Loyalty, as previously mentioned, requires trust. And trust requires honesty. On the premise that my examples of ‘harmless’ substitutes for swearing would be recognizable to the audience as old-fashioned, I would suggest that the use of them would therefore be a dishonest representation of the Norwegian language, and therefore a disloyal action. In this sense, I believe Pym’s approach of “why” over “how” might be helpful for Norwegian translators. If the current working conditions leave translators unable to provide

³ <https://www.statista.com/chart/20338/netflix-beats-tv-industry/>

ethically justifiable contributions, then maybe one should abstain from translating at all. But as things stand, it seems likely that the current state of dubbing-translation will persist. All in all I find myself agreeing with Pym's statement that the process of translation never is as simple as source vs. target (2012 : 6), I just disagree with his ideal of neutrality.

Conclusion

In this paper I have illustrated how the changes in the translation-industry has affected the ethical responsibilities of dubbing-translators for a younger audience. To do this, I have presented the ethical framework of Anthony Pym, seen in the context of Abdallah and Koskinen's projection of the transition into a network-based industry, and the consequences this has had on the autonomy, agency, and ethical freedom of translators. When I started researching this topic, I was already inclined to believe that dubbing-translators in Norway have a particular responsibility towards its target audience. But I was still surprised at the severity in which Abdallah and Koskinen described the developments the industry had undergone, and the extent to which I recognized the network-model they described, and the limitations such a system imposes upon translation as an ethical action. I also included the practical example of swearing in Norwegian dubs, inspired by Fekede & Fjeld (2016), Greenall (2011), and my own experiences. I would like to note that my own reflections on the matter should be read as subjective and anecdotal, serving only to illustrate examples from the industry, furthermore, the text is not intended as an encouragement for a higher frequency of swearing in Norwegian dubs of children's entertainment, but rather as an attempt to engage the reader to reflect on the subject matter, and what cultural and societal forces that determine when a taboo word no longer is taboo.

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