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Linguistic Variation in Subtitling

The subtitling of swearwords and discourse markers on public television, commercial television and DVD

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Abstract

This article focuses on the Swedish subtitling of two different linguistic features, i.e. swearwords and discourse markers. The material in question consists of one source text, the American film *Nurse Betty*, and three translations of this film; one was made for the public TV channel SVT1, one for the commercial TV channel TV3, and one for the DVD release of the same film. The subtitling of both swearwords and discourse markers are analysed quantitatively as well as qualitatively in order to see whether any patterns of translation emerge, and how these can possibly be explained. Results show that a high frequency of omission of both features in all three target texts may have its origin in a system of norms governing Swedish original written works and translations, and that the subtitling of swearwords, for various reasons, is more inclined to abide by these norms than is the subtitling of discourse markers, which in turn is governed by additional factors.

1 Introduction

Sweden is one of the countries in the world where subtitling is most extensively used. According to the Swedish Ministry of Culture (2003: 238), people in Sweden spend an average of 1 ½ hours per day reading subtitles and 20 minutes reading other material, a fact which in itself makes research in this area imperative. In the same report the Swedish Ministry of Culture has also stated (2003: 239) that the quality of subtitling in Sweden is of high importance, and that a study of the different TV channels' methods of subtitling should be performed.

This statement influenced the current and ongoing study from which this article proceeds. The study in its entirety is the basis for my PhD thesis which focuses on the subtitling of American films into Swedish on four different Swedish TV channels (SVT1, SVT2¹, TV3 and TV4), and DVD-releases. The aim of the thesis is to compare the subtitling from three different sources, i.e. public television (SVT1 and SVT2), commercial television (TV3 and

¹ SVT1 and SVT2 are two different channels, but they both belong to Swedish public television and abide by the same system and laws.

TV4) and DVD, and to identify similarities and variations found in the different translations. All channels chosen are easily accessible by most Swedes and are among the most viewed television channels, compared to less accessible channels such as ZTV, TV1000 and Canal+ (*Mediamätningar i Skandinavien, MMS 2005*). The two SVT channels, being public and state-owned, are considered serious and of high quality with a focus on news, cultural events, documentaries etc. while TV3, being a commercial channel, is not considered very serious or of comparable high quality with a focus on light entertainment. In between these extremes TV4 is positioned, which is a commercial channel with a mixture of more serious programs and lighter entertainment. In my PhD thesis I plan to include different types of television channels in order to identify differences between the channels in question, and investigate reasons as to why these differences occur and can be linked to the type of channel and/or the translating agency which subtitled the film. DVD-versions of the films are also included in the study to provide further insight into the subtitling of films in Sweden today.

This article will show parts of my ongoing study; with the aim to discuss the translation of two different linguistic features, i.e. swearwords and discourse markers within the framework of three different translations of the American film *Nurse Betty* (Gramercy Pictures 2000). The subtitles investigated are taken from the SVT1, the TV3 and the DVD-versions. The case study focuses on quantitative as well as qualitative aspects of the three target texts. The main focus is on the question of why one feature is treated almost identically in the three different subtitling environments, while the other is not or at least not to the same extent. Swearwords and discourse markers are looked at individually - quantitatively as well as qualitatively, to give a clearer overview of the material. The study will discuss variations between the source text (ST) and the three target texts (TTs) on the one hand, and between the three TTs on the other, and will raise questions concerning the reasons for these variations. One suggested motivation for both the similarities and differences of how swearwords and discourse markers are subtitled in Sweden today are target culture translational norms. In addition to a discussion of possible norms governing the subtitling of swearwords and discourse markers, other factors, such as the varying subtitling standards at each television channel or translating agency, will be considered².

2 Method and material

The material used for this case study is the source text, consisting of the complete transcribed soundtrack of the American film *Nurse Betty*, and the target texts, consisting of three translations of *Nurse Betty*, also transcribed in their entirety. *SVT Undertext AB* subtitled the film for SVT and SVT1 aired it on August 12th 2005, *SDI Mediagroup* subtitled the film for TV3, and it was aired on this channel on November 11th 2005, while *Mediatextgruppen* subtitled the DVD-version (the subtitles made by *SVT Undertext*, *SDI Mediagroup* and *Mediatextgruppen* will be referred to as ‘the SVT1 subtitles’, ‘the TV3 subtitles’ and ‘the DVD subtitles’, respectively, cf. below). The SVT1 and the DVD subtitles were made by the same subtitler, a fact that obviously influences the analyses made in this study, even though it is one of the intentions of this article to focus not on the individual subtitlers as such, but on the larger system within which they work.

The film *Nurse Betty* was chosen mainly because it was aired on two channels within a few months in the fall 2005. It was therefore of interest for a synchronic contrastive study of

² Subtitling standards are referred to in this article as the more or less rigid guidelines/rules dictated by authoritative powers at the TV channels or translating agencies.

the subtitling in different channels, as well as on DVD. Furthermore, the quantity of swearwords and discourse markers is quite high in the film, and it is thus a good source for investigating the translation of these particular features.

Swearwords and discourse markers were selected as linguistic features for this case study for various reasons. Both features are common in informal conversation and thus of interest for a study on film dialog. Also, previous studies on these features in subtitling are not numerous (cf. Chen 2004; Chaume 2004) which legitimizes the present research. In addition, swearwords and discourse markers are similar in that they are both considered unnecessary for the progress of a film's storyline itself; but only add more or less redundant information to the plot. On the other hand, they can both be of quite substantial importance for how a certain character appears on screen; e.g. the writers of the original film script might have added extra swearwords in the lines of a character to make him/her seem more aggressive, and extra discourse markers may have been added in another character's language to make him/her appear as hesitant. Both features may thus seem less important for the comprehension of a film compared to the importance of e.g. nouns and verbs but the support a viewer gets through the sound and image on the screen helps him/her in establishing sense continuity and can actually be very important when trying to "[establish] a coherent interpretation of discourse" (Aijmer 2002). One clear difference between swearwords and discourse markers is the fact that swearwords are taboo, whereas discourse markers are not. There might thus be a difference between the way the two features are treated, both in the ST and in the TTs.

3 Swearwords and discourse markers in *Nurse Betty*

Swearwords are defined by Ljung (1984: 22) and Andersson (2004: 78) as, in short, words deriving from subjects of taboo, being used as expressions of anger, surprise etc. A swearword is not any 'dirty' word, but a word referring to a subject of taboo in a certain circumstance; the primary function of a word like *shit*, for instance, is to refer to human or animal excrement. It has, however, through frequent usage as "a concept our culture sees as taboo [...] gained a widened meaning and become a dirty word, a swearword" (Karjalainen 2002: 13).

Discourse markers are defined as "a class of lexical expressions that link the interpretation of a segment ...to a prior segment" (Bibliography of pragmatics 2005), and as "[expressing] the speaker's attitude towards the situation spoken about, his assumptions, his intentions, his emotions" (Aijmer 2002: 12). Examples of discourse markers are *well, oh, okay, right, like* etc

3.1 A quantitative and qualitative overview of the material

The total number of swearwords in the *Nurse Betty* soundtrack is 132, whereas the total number in each of the TTs does not exceed 50; SVT1 includes 49 swearwords in their subtitles while TV3 includes 47, and the DVD subtitles include 50, which, for each translation, is a total of 37 % of the swearwords used in the ST.

The amount of swearwords omitted from the ST (63%) is thus almost identical in the three subtitle versions. Furthermore, the types of swearwords used in all three translations and the quantity of swearwords from each type, match the same categories of swearwords, the division of swearwords here being based on categories suggested by Andersson (2004: 79) and McEnery (2006: 30), i.e. 'Religion' (*God, Jesus Christ*), 'Sex' (*fuck*), 'Excrements' (*shit*), 'Sexist terms of abuse' (*bitch*) and 'Physical and mental handicaps' (*idiot*).

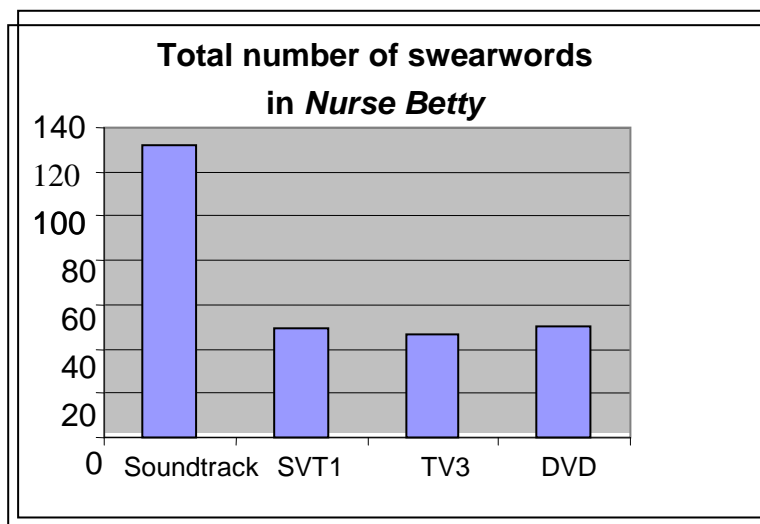


Fig. 1: Total number of swearwords in ST and TTs

Categories	Source Text	SVT1	TV3	DVD
Religion	29 (22%)	37 (76%)	29 (62%)	38 (73%)
Sex	56 (42%)	1 (2%)	1 (2%)	1 (2%)
Excrements	36 (27%)	6 (12%)	8 (17%)	6 (12%)
Sexist terms of abuse	7 (5%)	1 (2%)	3 (6%)	1 (2%)
Handicaps	4 (3%)	4 (8%)	6 (13%)	4 (8%)
Total	132	49	47	50

Tab. 1 Total numbers and percentages of different swearword categories in Nurse Betty

As can be seen in table 1 above³, the majority of the swearwords in the ST (42%) come from the ‘Sex’ category, whereas most of the TT swearwords originate in the ‘Religion’ category. There is a vast difference between the percentages of the ‘Sex’ category swearwords in the ST and the TTs. Only 2% of the swearwords in either TT originate from the category ‘Sex’, compared to 42% in the ST. There is thus a difference between the ST and the three TTs, but the TTs do not differ significantly when compared to each other.

The discourse markers looked at in the *Nurse Betty* soundtrack are of 24 different types, where *Oh*, *Well*, *So*, *Okay*, *Now*, *You know*, *Right*, *Hey*, *I mean* and *Allright* are the ten most frequent ones. The four most recurrent ones are *Oh*, occurring 62 times, *Well* 42 times, *So* 31 times and *Okay* 25 times. As can be seen in table 2 below, the total number of discourse markers of different kinds in the ST, i.e. the number of tokens, is 273, while the translations differ somewhat in frequency; the SVT1 subtitles include 83 Swedish discourse markers, divided among 24 types; the TV3 subtitles include 48, divided among 14 types; and the DVD subtitles include 95, divided among 26 types.

³ The percentages in the tables are whole numbers (no decimals), which sometimes adds up to a total number of less than 100%.

Tokens/Types	ST	SVT1	TV3	DVD
Tokens	273	83	48	95
Types	24	24	14	26

Tab. 2: Number of tokens and types of discourse markers in NB

Not all of the TT discourse markers are in complete quantitative agreement with the ST, but sometimes appear when there is no discourse marker in the ST (this is especially common in the DVD-version, which may explain the higher number of discourse markers here). The highest frequency of Swedish discourse markers in the TTs of *Nurse Betty* is found in the DVD subtitles, with the SVT1 subtitles consisting of almost as many types and tokens. Quantitatively, the TV3 subtitles include about half (51%) of the amount of discourse markers in the DVD subtitles, and just over half (58 %) of the amount in the SVT1 version.

The types included in the TV3 subtitles are much fewer than those in both the SVT1 and the DVD versions, reducing the variation in the use of discourse markers in the TV3 version. Note, however, that the amount of discourse marker types hardly differs between the ST and the SVT1 and DVD TTs.

The subtitling of discourse markers thus differs quantitatively and qualitatively quite significantly between the ST and the TTs, as well as between the public television channel and DVD-version on the one hand, and between the commercial television channel on the other hand.

4 Factors governing the different translations

After this overview of the quantity and quality of both swearwords and discourse markers in the three subtitling versions of *Nurse Betty*, an attempt will be made to answer two questions arising from the previous facts and figures.

The first question concerns the comparison between the ST and the TTs, and is asked relative to the subtitling of both swearwords and discourse markers: (1) why is such a vast amount of either feature omitted in the subtitles, and (2) why are certain types of either feature chosen over other types?

Regarding swearwords, why are only 37 % of the ST swearwords translated into Swedish in each TT, and why do Swedish subtitlers choose words from the traditional 'Religion' category, when spoken Swedish today - due to influences from other languages (Bokenblom 2005: 29; The Swedish Language Council, 2006: 331) - increasingly uses a great amount and variety of swearwords from the 'Sex' category.

As far as discourse markers are concerned, why are not more than 35 % of the ST discourse markers translated into either TT (30 % in the SVT1, 18 % in the TV3 and 35 % in the DVD subtitles), and why is there a tendency in subtitling not to include the discourse markers most used by, especially younger, Swedes today (e.g. *liksom* and *typ* [approximate translation: *like*]), but to adhere to the more traditional types (e.g. *ju*, *väl* etc.) of discourse markers (The Swedish Language Council 2006: 332).

The second question focuses on the comparison between the three TTs relating to the differences and similarities among the translations. Why is it that there is such a minor difference, both quantitatively and qualitatively, between the various target texts' way of subtitling American swearwords into Swedish, when there is quite a considerable difference, especially quantitatively, between the subtitling of discourse markers in the same target texts?

The answers below are not meant to be exhaustive in any way, but are intended to list

some possible reasons behind the subtitling of swearwords and discourse markers from American English into Swedish in the film under investigation. The proposed answers are, however, a starting point for further investigations and applications to additional studies on the subtitling of such features.

4.1 Norms governing the subtitling of swearwords and discourse markers

The fact that subtitling is governed by time and space constraints is a well-known fact and will not be disputed here. However, such constraints are not the only motivations for the final design of a subtitle (Fawcett 2003: 145) some of which will be discussed here.

The model introduced below is influenced by Karamitroglou's (2000: 70) way of seeing subtitling not in a vacuum, but as a part of a larger system. The framework of Karamitroglou's model has its origin in the idea that subtitlers are not the only persons influencing the translation. Karamitroglou sees a final translation product as being dependent on "the interaction between the elements [or factors] which constitute the system and the levels at which these elements/factors operate" (2000: 69). His model, which can only be outlined here in a reduced and simplified version, is based on the relationship between, on the one hand, hierarchical levels of what he calls **the system**, and on the other, free-flowing equal factors. In his model, the hierarchical levels are labelled **Upper, Middle and Lower level**, and the equal factors are labelled **Human agents, Products, Recipients, and Audiovisual Mode**. A norm can derive "from a higher level and reflect a more general phenomenon rather than be restricted to the situation where we first discovered it" (2000: 69). A norm detected at the lower level of Human agents, Products, Recipients or Audiovisual mode, might derive from the upper level of the same factor. Karamitroglou's model is to some extent incorporated into the model in Fig. 2 below to show that norms governing the translation of swearwords and discourse markers in Swedish subtitled material may in fact derive from norms of a 'higher level', governing the production of original written work in Sweden, as well as the translation of the same types of words in literature translated into Swedish. The model will not be applied here in its entirety, but merely as a structural orientation for the study.

What follows below (Fig. 2) is a suggestion of the way subtitling of swearwords and discourse markers in Sweden operates: not on their own as individual categories within the system of subtitling only, but in connection with other systems in the target culture.

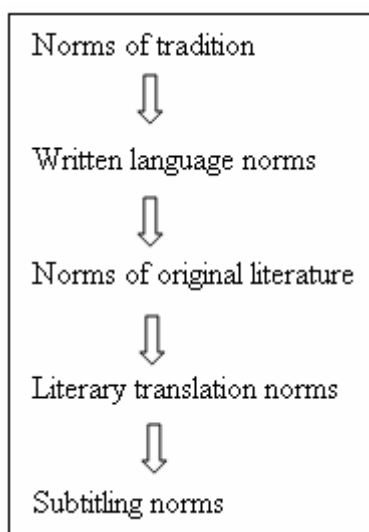


Fig. 2: Levels of norms governing the subtitling of swearwords and discourse markers

A possible answer as to both why the quantity of swearwords and discourse markers is less in the TTs, and why certain types are chosen over others, is that the subtitling of these particular features, possibly more than other linguistic features such as verbs, nouns etc., is governed by certain norms in the target culture. These norms are strong enough to considerably influence (1) the amount of the features to be translated, and (2) the quality, i.e. the target culture types/categories of the features used in the TTs. The power of the norms is so strong because they are interrelated with each other, and more or less ‘work together’. The guiding principle behind the hierarchical layers above (Fig. 2) is the fact that subtitling norms do not exist in a void, but that they derive directly from norms of literary translation. The norms governing literary translation derive from norms of originals written in the target culture, which in turn derive from norms of written and spoken language. The written language norms applicable to both swearwords and discourse markers originate from norms stating how we traditionally use these features in Sweden. The English Swedish Parallel Corpus (ESPC) consisting of comparable English and Swedish written text samples (both fiction and non-fiction) as well as translations of each text into English/Swedish, was used in order to test the hypotheses of the use of swearwords and discourse markers in both Swedish written originals and translations. The hypotheses proved to be true; both quantitatively and qualitatively the same pattern of usage of swearwords and discourse markers that emerge in the subtitling of these features also appears in the Swedish written originals and translations. The study of the ESPC thus confirms the assumption that the omission of swearwords and discourse markers as well as the use of their types/categories in question are governed by similar patterns as the Swedish written originals and translations in the parallel corpus.

Other studies also verify that subtitling often mirrors Swedish literal translation. Karjalainen (2002) confirms a great omission of swearwords in two Swedish translations of J.D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*, an omission almost identical in percentages to the omission of swearwords in the subtitling of *Nurse Betty* (see Tab.1). The fact that we rarely find swearwords or discourse markers in Swedish written work, and the fact that there are hardly any swearwords from the ‘Sex’ category, nor certain types of discourse markers (e.g. *typ*, *liksom*) in Swedish written originals, influence the way these words are treated, both quantitatively and qualitatively in literary translation, and as a consequence, in subtitling.

4.2 Additional factors governing the subtitling of discourse markers

A system of norms governing the subtitling of swearwords and discourse markers thus seems to be present in the Swedish target culture. This is, however, as we will see below, not the only interesting factor in our findings on the translations. In an attempt to answer question (2) above, we may find an indication for a somewhat broadened picture to the problem. Why is it that, if the norms governing the subtitling of swearwords and discourse markers are so strong, there are still differences between the three target texts’ way of subtitling discourse markers (but not of subtitling swearwords)? One answer is that there is a difference between swearwords and discourse markers in that the former are words of taboo and thus treated with more care than discourse markers, or indeed any other feature of text. The system of norms described above thus seems to be strong through all layers, from the norms of tradition to the norms of literary translation, when it comes to swearwords, hence powerfully governing the subtitling of these features. The same norms do govern the subtitling of discourse markers, but perhaps not as strongly or directly as they do the subtitling of swearwords. A reason for the difference found in this case study between the subtitling of discourse markers in especially (a) public television and DVD, and (b) commercial television, is the standards of subtitling which the different channels and translation companies have set and/or abide by. These standards are also more or less governed by different types of translational norms. In the case of the translation of swearwords, the norms seem to directly govern the standards of

various translating agencies which explains why the TTs are very similar. Relative to discourse markers, the standards at the different channels and companies seem to be almost as powerful as the norms, thus in themselves dictating quantitative and qualitative subtitling choices. According to an extract from the standards at *SVT Undertext*, which is subtitling for the public television channels SVT1 and SVT2⁴, SVT has a stated standard to include “little words” such as discourse markers into the subtitles whenever possible and thus to be more viewer-oriented and include viewers of different social and linguistic backgrounds as well, e.g. the deaf and hard of hearing. The aspiration to include little words is, it seems, not as noticeable in the commercial channels’ approach to subtitling, a tendency which is mirrored in the lower numbers of discourse marker tokens in the TV3 subtitle for *Nurse Betty* (Tab. 2).

Another possible reason for the difference between the subtitling rendered by public television and DVD on the one hand, and commercial television on the other, is the fact that the working conditions vary in these specific subtitling environments. At the public television channels SVT1 and SVT2, all subtitles are made by *SVT Undertext AB* (see footnote 3 below, however) and the majority of the employed subtitlers have extensive education and experience, as well as a higher income than the subtitlers at the commercial channel TV3, which has no subtitlers employed, but uses various translating agencies. The agencies subtitling DVD films employ full-time subtitlers as well as subtitlers on a freelance basis. How these varying working conditions might influence the choices made by individual subtitlers in Sweden has not yet been investigated. A possible model of the influences of certain norms, standards and working conditions might look like Figure 3 below; in which the norms (of tradition, written language, literary translation etc), the working conditions, and the standards of subtitling all affect the final subtitling product.

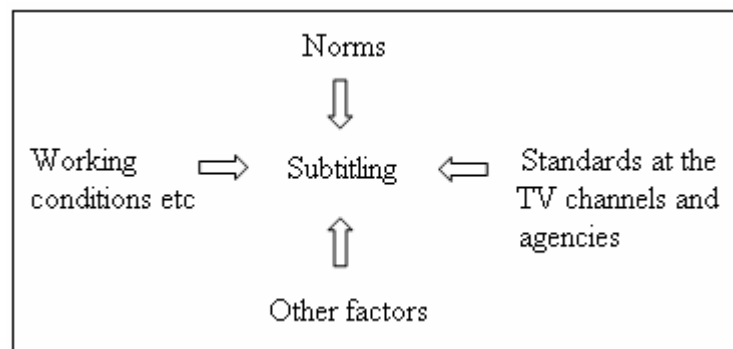


Fig. 3: Factors governing the subtitling of discourse markers

Of course, there are numerous other factors influencing a final subtitling product, such as various technical constraints, individual translator preferences and target culture audience expectations. This model is just a preliminary look at the complex system surrounding and governing the subtitling process in Sweden today.

⁴ *SVT Undertext AB* has (summer/autumn 2006) decided to reform its subtitling production and let external agencies take over the translation of most material aired on SVT1 and SVT2. If /when this takes place the conditions for the subtitled material at SVT will change (i.e. both subtitling standards and working conditions for the subtitlers will change) and the final subtitle product will possibly become more similar to that of the commercial channels.

5 Conclusion

To summarize and conclude, the system of factors affecting the subtitling process in Sweden decides how features such as swearwords and discourse markers are treated in this mode of translation. We have seen that both of these linguistic features are omitted to a large extent in all three target texts, and that the types/categories of features used are significantly influenced by the traditional way of using these words in Swedish written works and translations. There is, however, a discrepancy between the way swearwords and discourse markers are treated in the TTs; the translation of swearwords are very similar both quantitatively and qualitatively in all three TTs, whereas the translation of discourse markers differs quite considerably between the same TTs. The subtitling of different linguistic features thus seems to be governed by a variety of factors, these factors varying by each feature. As far as the subtitling of swearwords and discourse markers is concerned, this article supports the hypothesis that the former is more inclined to be governed by different sets of translational norms in the target culture than the latter. The subtitling of discourse markers is naturally also governed by translational norms, but this article has argued that these norms, to a larger extent than the swearwords, are co-determined by factors such as the television channels' varying standards of subtitling, and, possibly, the different working conditions at each channel or translating agency.

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