

## Metaphor translation in subtitling

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### Abstract

The paper aims to shed light on how subtitlers cope with metaphor translation. The paper presents the results of a case study on a set of English subtitles of one Croatian movie. Metaphor translation procedures were analyzed using Conceptual Metaphor Theory. There are four basic ways to translate metaphors: a. using the same conceptual metaphor, b. using a different conceptual metaphor, c. using a non-metaphorical paraphrase; and d. deleting the metaphor. In addition, a non-metaphorical expression can be translated by a metaphorical expression. Metaphors are mental, linguistic, but also cultural entities. Since translation in the contemporary age is recognized as both linguistic and cultural transfer, translating metaphors is at the core of the translation task. Many conceptual metaphors are universal and can be found in (almost) all languages, but some are culturally specific, appearing in just one language (group). This case study shows that the universality of metaphor influences the choice of a metaphor translation procedure, in a way that shared metaphors are mostly translated using the same conceptual metaphor, whereas non-shared metaphors are translated by a different metaphor or a non-metaphorical paraphrase. The paper also explores the ways in which the specifics of subtitling as a constrained type of translation influence the choice of a translation procedure. The results are compared to the results of a previous study, which dealt with the translation of metaphors in literature.

**Keywords:** conceptual metaphor, translation, subtitling, universality, conventionality, temporal and spatial constraints

### Introduction

This paper deals with translation of metaphors in interlingual subtitling. The focus is on the kinds of procedures (solution types) for the translation of metaphorical expressions. In addition, the distribution of the procedures in the TT (target text) is explored, as well as factors potentially motivating the use of a particular procedure. One of the examined motivating factors is the universality of metaphor, i.e. to what

extent is the choice of a particular procedure conditioned by the fact that a certain conceptual metaphor or metaphorical expression is or is not shared between the SL (source language) and the TL (target language). Other explanatory variables are connected with the characteristics of subtitling as a special kind of translation. The typology of procedures is based on the methodological apparatus of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), formulated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). The results are compared to the results of our previous research on metaphor translation in the context of literary translation (Schmidt, 2012).

### **Conceptual metaphor and its linguistic expression**

In the cognitive-linguistic view, metaphor is defined as understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain (Kövecses, 2002: 4ff.). A convenient shorthand way of capturing this view of metaphor is the following: CONCEPTUAL DOMAIN (A) IS CONCEPTUAL DOMAIN (B), which is called a conceptual metaphor. It is important to distinguish conceptual metaphors (in this paper labeled 'M') from metaphorical linguistic expressions (lowercase 'm'), the latter resulting from mapping of elements of one domain onto the corresponding elements of another domain. For example, ARGUMENT IS WAR is a conceptual metaphor, while expressions like 'Your claims are *indefensible*', 'He *attacked* every weak point in my argument', etc. are metaphorical linguistic expressions, i.e. linguistic manifestations of that conceptual metaphor.

### **Typology of metaphor translation procedures**

The translation solutions were classified according to a new typology, which combines CMT with the typologies developed within translation studies. Specifically, our typology combines the one by the translation scholar Gideon Toury (cf. Prunč, 2002: 244) and the one by the cognitive linguist Zoltan Kövecses (2004).<sup>1</sup> The following typology of metaphor translation procedures is proposed:

1.  $(M \rightarrow M)^2$   
a.  $m \rightarrow m$       a metaphorical expression is translated by a metaphorical expression of the same conceptual metaphor with the same mapping and the same meaning

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed description of Toury's and Kövecses's typologies, and the way they were combined, see Schmidt, 2012: 88-91.

<sup>2</sup>  $M \rightarrow M$  and  $M \rightarrow M1$  refer to the higher, conceptual level, i.e. whether the target expression belongs to the same conceptual metaphor, or to a different one, respectively. This higher level is in a way superimposed on a typology based on the more basic level of metaphorical expressions.

$b.m \rightarrow m'$	a metaphorical expression is translated by a metaphorical expression of the same conceptual metaphor with a different mapping and a similar meaning
2.( $M \rightarrow M1$ ) $m \rightarrow ml$	a metaphorical expression is translated by a metaphorical expression of a different conceptual metaphor with a different mapping and a similar meaning
3. $m \rightarrow non-m$	a metaphorical expression is translated by a non-metaphorical expression with a similar meaning (also known as a paraphrase)
4. $m \rightarrow \emptyset$	a metaphorical expression is translated by a zero-element (also known as deletion, omission or zero-translation)
5. $non-m \rightarrow m$	a non-metaphorical expression is translated by a metaphorical expression with a similar meaning
6. $\emptyset \rightarrow m$	a zero-element is translated by a metaphorical expression

Each type (1-6) is exemplified and defined in Section 4. The above typology was tested on a corpus of literary translations (Schmidt, 2012), and it proved to be adequate for the analysis of metaphor translation; no further types were recorded.

## Research design

As the source text (ST) we used the Croatian movie *Što je muškarac bez brkova?* ('What Is a Man without a Moustache?'). As the TT we used a set of English subtitles of that movie. The identified ST metaphorical expressions were matched with their TT equivalents. The ST-TT segments were then analyzed and the translation procedures were classified. The corpus was analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively.

## Analysis

Altogether 6 types of translation procedures (solution types) were identified. In the following sections each of the identified procedures is exemplified and defined.

### $M \rightarrow M$

#### 1.1.1. $m \rightarrow m$ (1a)

- (1) ST: *ne znaš ti šta sam ja sve proša u životu*<sup>3</sup>('you don't know what I've been through in life')<sup>4</sup>

TT: You have no idea what I've been through in my life. [00:39:25,500]<sup>5</sup>

The metaphorical expressions in the ST and TT are the same; they belong to the same M and have the same meaning.

1.1.2.  $m \rightarrow m'$  (1b)

- (2) ST: *đava te odnija Luka* ('May the devil take you away, Luka')

TT: *Go to hell, Luka!* [00:59:32,740]

The metaphorical expressions in the ST and TT are different, but they belong to the same M and have a similar meaning.

$m \rightarrow m1$

- (3) ST: *reci meni dal ću biti tvoja* ('tell me if I'll be yours')

TT: Tell me will you always *hold my hand* [00:00:53,660]

The metaphorical expressions in the ST and TT are different; they belong to different Ms, but their meaning is similar.

$m \rightarrow non-m$

- (4) ST: *[to je] sve naopako!* ('[it is] all upside down/reversed/inverted/wrong side out')

TT: [This is] all *totally wrong!* [01:04:57,340]

The ST metaphorical expression is translated by a non-metaphorical expression with a similar meaning.

$m \rightarrow \emptyset$

- (5) ST: *...na nebu misec mlad* ('up in the sky the moon is young')

TT: the moon is up [01:22:10,940]

The ST metaphorical expression is omitted (deleted) in the TT.

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<sup>3</sup> The ST examples are written without observing the spelling and punctuation conventions because they were transcribed directly from the spoken dialogue.

<sup>4</sup> In round brackets is a rough, literal translation of the ST.

<sup>5</sup> The numbers in square brackets indicate the exact time the subtitle appears on the screen.

**non-m → m**

(6) ST: *čuo sam da je sestra progovorila* ('I heard [your] sister started to talk')

TT: I heard your sister *broke her silence*. [00:11:02,300]

The ST non-metaphorical expression is translated by a metaphorical expression with a similar meaning.

**∅ → m**

This procedure implies an appearance of a metaphorical expression in the TT which cannot be matched to anything in the ST. No examples of this procedure were found in the corpus.

In comparison with our previous research on metaphor translation in literature, the types of procedures used are largely the same. The only procedure not used in subtitling is the addition of a footnote, since this is technically impossible for the lack of space.

**Distribution of translation procedures**

**Table 1.** *Distribution of metaphor translation procedures in the TT*

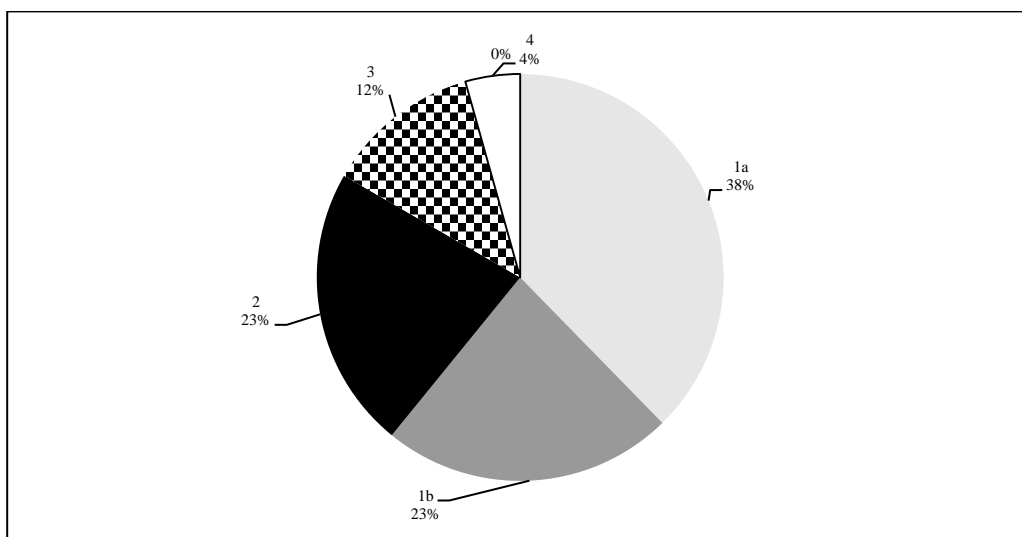
Procedure	N	%
1a } M→M	52	38
1b } M→M	32	23
2 (M→M1)	31	23
3 (m→non-m)	17	12
4 (m→∅)	6	4
total	138	100

The left-hand column in Table 1 lists the types of procedures. Five procedures were used (procedure 5,  $\emptyset \rightarrow m$ , is not included, since it does not refer to the translation of metaphor but into metaphor). The middle column shows the number of times a particular procedure was used. For example, procedure 1a was used 52 times. The total number of identified metaphorical expressions is 138. The right-hand column shows the same data expressed in percentages.

The most frequently used procedure was 1a (38%). Procedures 1a and 1b are grouped together, since both imply translation by an expression of the same M. Together, 1a + 1b were used in 61% of the cases. Procedure 1 is followed by procedure 2 (23%), 3 (12%) and 4 (4%), respectively.

Figure 1 shows the same data in a pie chart. The identified procedures are numbered according to our typology, and the percentages represent the rates with which each procedure is used in the TT.

**Figure 1.** Distribution of metaphor translation procedures in the TT



Another frequent procedure in the corpus is  $\emptyset \rightarrow m$  (not included in Table 1 and Figure 1), represented with 35 cases. It refers to cases in which a non-metaphorical expression was translated with a metaphor. One way of looking at this procedure is as a compensation procedure. It compensates for the loss of metaphorical expressions resulting from the use of procedures 3 (paraphrase) and 4 (deletion). Of the total 138 metaphorical expressions in the ST, 115 were translated by metaphorical expressions (procedures 1+2), while 23 were either translated non-metaphorically or deleted (procedures 3+4). However, if we bring the 35 cases of procedure 5 into the equation, we can see that the TT actually contains more metaphors than the ST (115 transferred from ST + 35 new ones = 150). The loss was thus more than compensated by using procedure 5.

In comparison with the previous study, procedures 2 and 4 are here used more frequently, and procedure 3 less frequently. The reason for using  $m \rightarrow m$  more than  $m \rightarrow non-m$  could be that metaphorical language is more concise than the non-

metaphorical, which is important given the time and space constraints of subtitling (see Section 5.8.2). Or, the subtitler wanted to keep the metaphoricity of the dialogue. Procedure 4 is used more often than in literature translation probably for the same reason of saving space and time. The number of occurrences of procedure 5 was not counted in the previous study, so there is no ground for comparison. In the following section we try to account for the motivation for using a particular procedure.

### Motivational factors

#### *Universality of metaphor*

If a metaphor is shared by most languages, we can call it universal. When we consider just a pair of languages, a metaphor can be either shared or non-shared. However, in some cases a conceptual metaphor is shared, but the particular mapping (and the linguistic expression) is not. This gives us three categories of 'sharedness'/universality: 1. the metaphor is shared and so is the linguistic expression, 2. the metaphor is shared, but the linguistic expression is not, and 3. the metaphor is not shared. Consider Table 3 below.

**Table 3.** Universality categories in relation to type of translation procedure

		ST metaphorical expressions (N)	1a) m→m	1b) m→m'	2) m→m1	3)m→non- m	4) m→∅
(1)	shared M, shared m	81	<b>52</b>	6	14	4	5
(2)	shared M, non-shared m	38	0	<b>26</b>	4	8	0
(3)	non-shared M, non- shared m	19	0	0	<b>13</b>	5	1
	total N:	138	52	32	31	17	6

Table 3 shows the three universality categories in relation to the type of translation procedure used in our TT. For each category, first the total number of metaphors is given, then a breakdown by a particular procedure. For example, category (1) contains 81 metaphorical expressions, of which 52 were translated by procedure 1a, 6 by procedure 1b, 14 by procedure 2, 4 by procedure 3, and 5 by procedure 4. Thus,

the majority of category 1 metaphors were translated by procedure 1a (52 out of 81, or 64%). The remaining 36% were distributed across other types of procedures (1b=7%, 2=17%, 3=5%, 4=6%). Other two categories also show a significant correlation with a particular type of procedure. Category(2) is most frequently translated by procedure 1b (26 out of 38, or 68%), followed by procedures 3 (21%) and 2 (11%). Category (2) shows zero correlation with procedures 1a and 4. Category(3) is most frequently translated by procedure 2 (13 out of 19, or 68%), followed by procedures 3 (26%) and 4 (6%). There is no correlation with 1a and 1b.

In other words, if the TL had the same expression as the SL, that same expression was indeed used in the TT in most of the cases (1a); if the same expression was not used, it was most frequently substituted by an expression of a different M with similar meaning (2), and less frequently it was translated by a different expression of the same M (1b), or deleted (4), or paraphrased by non-metaphorical language (3), respectively. If the TL had the same M, but not the same expression, a different expression of the same M was used in most of the cases; alternatively, a non-metaphorical paraphrase was used, or an expression of a different conceptual metaphor with similar meaning. Finally, if the TL did not have the same M, the ST expression was in most cases substituted in the TT by an expression of a different M with a similar meaning; alternatively, a non-metaphorical paraphrase was used, or the ST expression was deleted.

The data indicates that the category of universality of metaphor does have an impact on the choice of procedure; moreover, it allows us to predict to an extent which procedure will be used.

However, there is also variation that we have to account for. In a number of cases, a procedure other than the 'default' was used, which means that there have to be other factors apart from universality influencing the choice of procedure.

Table 3 can also be read vertically. The first column on the left shows the number of metaphorical expressions belonging to a particular universality category. Out of the total 138 expressions, 81 (or 59%) were attributed to category 1; 38 (27%) to category 2, and 19 (14%) to category 3. The second column from the left shows that procedure 1a was used 52 times, exclusively for the translation of category 1 metaphors; there was no correlation with categories 2 and 3, etc.

In sum, there is a strong correlation between the universality category 1 and procedure 1a, category 2 and procedure 1b, category 3 and procedure 2. Universality was found to be an important factor in the previous study as well.



### *Other motivational factors*

Apart from the universality of metaphor, other factors potentially influencing the choice of translation procedure are the conventionality of the TL expression, and temporal and spatial constraints of subtitling. Due to the lack of space, each of the above factors is only briefly exemplified and defined.

- (7) ST: *kad se podnapiju kao svinje* ('when they get as drunk as pigs')  
TT: When they're totally *pissed* [01:15:43,900]

In example (7) the translator chose the more conventional expression 'to be totally pissed' (m→m1) over the less conventional 'to get drunk as a pig' (m→m). Conventionality here means greater frequency of use. In certain contexts (e.g. in informal register), as shown in example (8), using a metaphorical expression is more conventional than non-metaphorical language.

- (8) ST: *razumin, razumin* ('I understand, I understand')  
TT: I *get it*, I *get it* [00:23:57,140]

In example (9) the metaphor is omitted because the meaning is clear from the co-text:

- (9) ST: *a vrime nikako okriće na jugo pa...* ('Well, the weather is turning to sirocco, so...')  
TT: With this sirocco [...] [00:37:08,980]

Subtitlers frequently have to shorten the dialogue, omitting everything that is redundant, because of the technical constraints of subtitling. Namely, "people speak more quickly than they can read so most language needs to be summarized in subtitles. Space constraints arise [as well] because there is room for only about 30 or 40 characters/spaces across a screen", and a maximum of two or three lines of text. (O'Connell: 129). This often confines subtitling to an auxiliary function, that of complementing the dialogue rather than duplicating it.

Conventionality was significant for motivation in the previous study as well, while temporal and spatial constraints are specific to subtitling.

### **Conclusion**

The proposed typology was found to be adequate for the description of metaphor translation in subtitling. There are indications that the universality of metaphor, the

conventionality of expression and the technical constraints of subtitling influence the choice of translation procedure.

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