

Dumbing it Down: The Case of Dubbing Hollywood Films to Hindi

Author: Abdur Rehman Khan, Shiv Nadar University

The question of whether a translation should be intended for a target audience or not is an old one and different schools of thought answer it accordingly. Walter Benjamin (2000) starts his seminal text “The Task of the Translator”, by writing “In the appreciation of a work of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful... No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener” (p.15). The film industry, on the other hand, relies heavily on its projected financial success. Taking the particular case of India with the ever-increasing multiplexes in Tier 1 and Tier 2 cities the option of watching a Hollywood movie in its original language (English) is now reaching a wider audience by the day. Due to this particular fact, translations of Hollywood films fall prey to a very specific target audience that is a ‘non-English listener’ i.e., those who do not have access to the English language but have a certain interest in Hollywood films. In this context we have a clear answer to Benjamin’s question “Is a translation meant for readers who do not understand the original?” (2000, p.15). The effect of this particularity will be discussed in detailed subtopics through a close reading of some of the popular film franchises of Hollywood in the Hindi Dubbing Industry. I would like to mention that almost all the examples used in this paper are not cherry-picked, as numerous similar examples of each category can be found easily, however, the scope of the paper will allow me to include only a limited number of films and their dialogues. As a text-only format the paper will have limitations in bringing details which must have been retained if this were a video essay, but keeping Jakobson in mind we will move forward as the process will be “intersemiotic transposition—from one system of signs into another, e.g., from music, dance, cinema, or painting into verbal” (2000, p.118). The paper will try to explore the translation of dialogues across the different genres of Hollywood films while investigating the creative reinterpretations and challenges of diverse dubbing projects.

Time Restrictions

Dubbing is a crucial process that enables viewers to understand audiovisual content in different languages. It requires linguistic expertise and cultural sensitivity to accurately convey

the intended meaning and emotions. Precise timing and concise expression are key to providing an immersive and accessible experience for the target audience. In their essay “Politeness in Screen Translating”, Basil Hatim and Ian Mason emphasize “the pragmatic dimension of context and the constraints of particular communicative tasks affect variously the textural devices employed both in original screenwriting and in the writing of subtitles” (2000, p.430). Any form of translation has a certain limitation of time and space depending on the source text. A translated chapter of a novel or an essay certainly has the most freedom in utilizing the assigned space, the length of the sentences can change to a great extent, and so does the paragraphs and the text in its entirety and still the change will not be noticeable. The case of translating poems has its own peculiarities; even prose poems contain a certain structure let alone the established ‘forms’ such as sonnets and villanelles. The translator can choose to retain the structure, but the choice is always there to tamper with the given space. Such a choice is absent in dubbing, the dialogues are synced to a fraction of seconds. This syncing should not be confused with lip-syncing which is almost impossible to attain as Eugene Nida has written “No two languages exhibit identical systems of organizing symbols into meaningful expressions. In all grammatical features, that is order of words, types of dependencies, markers of such dependency relationships, and so on, each language exhibits a distinctive system.” (2000, p.126). Every phoneme is produced with different positioning of the mouth and rounding and closing of the lips. Hence it becomes theoretically impossible to come up with a translation which is not just syntactically and semantically correct, but which also matches the movement of the mouth and lips of the utterer. In Dubbing the main objective is to maintain the economy of the words even at the cost of faithfulness, appropriateness and accuracy. This tight restriction plays a huge role in the translation as we’ll see in the following topics.

The Translators in Hindi Dubbing

Though many a time the translators of films are uncredited but in most of the big budget films the job of translation is not given to Translators per se but to those who have established themselves as dialogues writers in the Hindi Film Industry. The dubbing of recent Marvel films was accredited to Manoj Muntashir a well-known dialogue writer, accused of reusing popular lines from the Hindi Cinema in places where they had no connection to the original whatsoever. According to Muntashir however ‘Literal translation is a mistake’ as per the Scroll article (Ghosh, 2018, para 11). In another interview with Film Companion, Muntashir claims “Translating humour is a very very difficult task. But I use Indian context and references. If

they talk about an American pop star, I can talk about Sonu Nigam. But it's not necessary that you must do that too. You could avoid that route and create some other lines which work equally well" (D'Mello, 2018, para. 6). Muntashir is notorious for replacing lines and lines from the original, so much so that the final output becomes more of a rendition than a translation. However according to one of his such renditions though *The Black Panther* (2018) did a total earning of 38 Crores on the Indian Box Office (BOTY,2018). How much of this financial success owes itself to Muntashir's translation is up for debate but Marvel's decision to keep him for the sequels does not give a convoluted signal.

Jokes losing details

When jokes are translated, they often lose their nuances and subtleties. The cultural context, wordplay, and idiomatic expressions that make them funny in one language may not be easily conveyed in another. In her groundbreaking essay, "The Politics of Translation", Gayatri Spivak does a deconstruction of the process of accessing a translated text. Spivak writes: "Logic allows us to jump from word to word by means of clearly indicated connections. Rhetoric must work in the silence between and around words in order to see what works and how much" (2001, p.399). She emphasizes how actual meaning in rhetoric resides between the syntagm of words and not necessarily in them, as Spivak goes on to say "The jagged relationship between rhetoric and logic, condition and effect of knowing, is a relationship by which a world is made for the agent so that the agent can act in an ethical way, a political way, a day-to-day way; so that the agent can be alive, in a human way, in the world"(2001, p399). I argue that Fanon's concept of 'disalienation' is at work when it comes to the translation of jokes in dubbing as an attempt to minimise alienation. One can sense a clear intention to make the agent more alive and human, removed from its foreignness. There is a deliberate attempt to use 'lowly' words for the target audience which are not in the registers of day-to-day conversations let alone standard or '*Maanak*' Hindi. In *Kangaroo Jack* (2003) a comedy film, there is an elaborate joke on the word 'barber', there is a setup, a context and then the punchline (McNally, 2003, 00:06:22). In the Hindi dubbed version, however, the following line is used "*main ek Hajjaam hun*" (I am a Hairdresser), the target audience is supposed to laugh at this word, there is no other punchline, and the setup is replaced by some banter, so the context becomes absent, and the joke lays flat. One can only speculate whether the translator hoped that the sheer iconicity of the word would save the joke. The use of such instances is innumerable, and here I will focus more on variety.

Puns are linguistic gems that often thrive on wordplay, cleverly relying on specific cultural or linguistic nuances. However, when translated, they can lose their essence. The intricate details, double entendres, and subtle humour often fall by the wayside, leaving behind a mere shadow of their original wit, lost in the vast realm of translation. Jakobson remarks that “The pun, or to use a more erudite, and perhaps more precise term—paronomasia, reigns over poetic art, and whether its rule is absolute or limited, poetry by definition is untranslatable, only creative transposition is possible” (Jakobson, 2000, p.118). This transposition can be seen in another action film titled *Fast and Furious: Five (2011)*; there is a scene where the car and the apparels of a certain duo of characters are to be mocked. In the original, the dialogue goes “When are you going to give Martin Luther King his car back?” and in reply, the character says, “As soon as you give Rick James his jacket back” (Lin, 2011, 00:42:30). This dialogue in the Hindi dubbed is translated as “*ye Baba Adam ke zamane ki jacket kyun pehni hai?*” (Why are you wearing a jacket from the times of Adam). Sure, the underlying idea has been translated in this instance, but it is the specificities that are prone to get lost in most Hindi dubbing cases. As in this example the character was indeed wearing a jacket which was popularly worn by 1950s American singer Rick James. Simplification is always at work in situations like these, but in the translator’s defence if the targeted audience is bombarded with foreign references successively then the threat of losing narrative cohesion is increased. It can be argued that such simplifications are made at the cost of specificities because the stakes of the plot not being followed by the targeted audience are simply very high. The *Ocean’s* series is notorious for its use of name-dropping of people in American pop culture, one example being “We offer Bank a Billy Martin” (Soderbergh, 2007, 00:08:21). It alludes to the story of baseball player Billy Martin, who was dismissed and subsequently rehired by New York Yankees owner Steinbrenner multiple times. It signifies the act of granting someone another opportunity or a second chance. As Muntashir acknowledged such culture-related lines are always difficult to translate, but what is sad to notice is the fact that instead of attempting to find an equivalent name from the target culture or elaborating on the name’s significance it gets replaced by totally unrelated, and sometimes unbearable, banter.

Another example is from *Captain America: Civil War (2016)* where a character's GPA on a 4-point scale and his particular achievements are reduced to “*padhne mein hoshiyar*” (smart in studies) in the Hindi version from the original “Oh, that's Charles Spencer by the way. He's a great kid. Computer engineering degree. 3.6 GPA. Had a floor-level gig. An Intel plan

for the fall” (Russo, 2016, 00:29:06). There is a clear absence of mentioning the chip manufacturing company Intel as if it will be too much to comprehend for the Hindi dubbed audience. Examples of simplifications and sanitization are also prevalent where the mere mentions of alcoholic drinks are replaced by Indian cuisine such as ‘*Biryani*’, and so on and so forth.

Localization

So far, I have only mentioned instances where the translation process was miserable, to say the least. But that is not always the case, there are some brilliant works of translation which have been produced by the Hindi Dubbing Industry, one example being *The Pirates of the Caribbean* series which manages to translate the Western folkloristic elements while maintaining the humour. Words and concepts are borrowed from Indian astrology and folk beliefs like *shagun*, *nazar*, *shubh*, *muhurat*, *shapit* etc. In *Curse of the Black Pearl* The dialogue “Cursed pirates sail these waters... It is bad luck to have a woman onboard too, even a miniature one” is translated as “*Shapit lutere is ilaake mein ghumte hain...bhot bura shagun hota hai jahaz par ek aurat ka hona, phir chahen wo choti hi kyun na ho*”(Verbinski,2003, 00:01:16). The careful use of the word *na* (no) does not comply with the original on a syntactic level but it manages to capture the sneer, a difficult thing to retain otherwise. It is small details like this which make a translation appear not jarring and synthetic. In the following example from the animated film *Coco*, “What colour is the sky” is translated as “*Kaho taaron ko tum chand*” (You call the stars the moon) i.e. verses are changed semantically but the pragmatics are conserved by retaining the analogy and maintaining the poetics. (Molina&Unkrich, 2017, 00:51:28)

Original	Hindi Dubbed	Translation of Hindi Dubbed
What color is the sky ¡Ay, mi amor! ¡Ay, mi amor! You tell me that it's red ¡Ay, mi amor! ¡Ay, mi amor! Where should I put my shoes ¡Ay, mi amor! ¡Ay, mi amor! You say put them on your head ¡Ay, mi amor! ¡Ay, mi amor!	Kaho taaron ko tum chand Aye huzoor aye huzoor Ya kaho din ko raat Aye huzoor aye huzoor Hai meetha samandar Aye huzoor aye huzoor Maanu har ek teri baat Aye huzoor aye huzoor	You call the stars the moon Your grace, your grace Or call the day a night Your grace, your grace The ocean is sweet Your grace, your grace I follow whatever you say Your grace, your grace

The translation here stands true to Jakobson's remark that "In poetry, verbal equations become a constructive principle of the text. Syntactic and morphological categories, roots, affixes, phonemes and their components (distinctive features)—in short, any constituents of the verbal code—are confronted, juxtaposed, brought into contiguous relation according to the principle of similarity and contrast and carry their own autonomous signification. The phonemic similarity is sensed as a semantic relationship." (2000, p.118) This Phonemic similarity is abundant in this animated musical film by Disney titled *Coco* (2017) with phrases like '*tum taal mein ho kankaal*' (you are in rhythm Mr Skeleton) . The dubbing of animated Hollywood films is almost always better than their live-action counterparts. Thankfully there exist some works of dubbing which pay immense importance to delicate nuances and subtleties as can be seen in *Finding Nemo* (2003) where characters have accents viz. Australian, French, and Italian are replaced by stereotyped Punjabi, Bhojpuri, Bengali, Gujarati and Tamil along with respective syntax and register.

The attempt at disalienation in dubbing also takes place by using certain registers and accents of Hindi, one of the most popular examples of this is the overuse of the Mumbai (thug) Street Talk also known as *Tapori*. The source film does not necessarily have to have characters that are street thugs, the *Tapori* language finds its way in many of the action films nonetheless. Marvel's *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) has twin characters with an Eastern European accent,

Aradhna Sound Services Mumbai decided to give them a Haryanvi accent and dialogues as absurd as its Hindi title *Angare bane Sholay: Kalyug ka Mahayudh*. Surely one can argue that it is a subjective matter but to most people, their dialogues and their accents feel out of place and overdone, to say the least. Interestingly their Haryanvi accent is phased out in the sequels of the film. The preceding title bears resemblance to the morbid but not macabre titles of Hindi dubs of other action films like *Detonator as Maut Ka Tandav* (Dance of Death), *Deep Blue Sea as Maut Ka Samundar* (Ocean of Death), *Planet of the Apes as Vinash Ka Arambh* (Inception of Destruction), *Ghost Rider as Mahakal* (Ultimate Destroyer), *Legion as Maut Ke Farishte* (Angels of Death), *Resident Evil as Maut Ka Bulawa* (Invitation of Death) which to most Hindi speakers are hilarious and for sure lacks subtlety and come across as overdoing of a repeated formula of using language which celebrates violence and death, and the luring inherent connotation of action-filled adventure. I argue that the dubbing industry has identified its target audience for each genre of films and certainly has a preconceived notion of what the target audience wants regarding content and its delivery where registers, lexical fields (word choice) and accents are its main constituents. Surely an analysis pertaining to the Frankfurt School of Thought is required here but is beyond this paper's scope. I would conclude by saying though the translation of these dubbed films will never be appropriate for those who can access the original, in a comparative study such dubbings will often be found unfaithful, lacking tones present in the original or specificities but as a standalone product these dubbings work for the most part. They prove themselves successful in terms of financial performance and providing the targeted audience with an experience of their own.

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