Swearwords in Subtitling: A Case Study on Students’ Translation Project

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Abstract
Despite their consideration as impolite remarks in communication, swearwords play an inseparable part from linguistics repertoire. As defined by Aijmer (2002:12), swearwords “[express] the speaker’s attitude towards the situation spoken about, his assumptions, his intentions, his emotions”. Carrying ‘negative’ label makes swearwords the centre of attention. Interestingly, movies that have turned into public entertainment sphere blooms the use of swearwords. The statement is supported by Azzaro (2005:1) who states that “television is often blamed for the circulation of once forbidden expression, and films in particular get the blame.” To add fuel to the fire, Cressman et al (2009) has also noted a rising frequency of swearwords usages in Hollywood movies. With the increasing number of Hollywood movies in Indonesia, English swearwords phenomena cannot be neglected. However, deleting or even softening swearwords will put the artistic touch of cinematography at stake. In this context, translators, especially subtitle translators, play an important role in dealing with swearwords phenomenon. As to introduce translation students to this complex matter, the writer gave them a subtitling task of swearwords. Twenty students consisting of twelve males and eight females were involved in this project and ‘8 Miles’ movie was used as the translation task. Surprisingly, both male and female students did not try to soften or delete the use of swearwords. Most of the English swearwords were adopted into Indonesian swearwords.

Keywords: Subtitling, Swearwords, Translation
1. Introduction

Language is a crucial element in the life since language is the most important thing which is used to communicate among human beings. In an extreme scope, human beings cannot live properly without language. Language is a media to deliver the factual object and it is transformed into language as a means to exchange information. Gadamer (in Regan, 2012:286) also supports the statement by saying that “language acting as the medium for understanding and a means of sharing the complexities of human experience”.

Language is an entity which develops during the living of human beings. The evolution of language can be observed from the historical process of the human beings’ development. The growth of languages also creates communication boundary; since many people use different languages. Thus, translation is one way to solve the problem. This happens because translation can bridge two different languages. In this context, Girikimukku (2017) expands the definition by quoting Newmark and Bassnett-McGuire’s thoughts which underline the notion of translation as the act of rendering a textual and contextual message from one language to another one.

Film is also a medium to deliver the message of the director to the audience. The problem that may appear is the film is delivered in a foreign language while the audiences do not understand the language. Therefore, subtitling appears to be one of the solutions to this problem. Subtitling is a process of providing synchronized captions for film or television dialogue (Spanakaki, 2007:8). In other words, subtitling is one way to transfer messages of movie dialogues by using written information which usually consists of two lines under the screen. The process of subtitling is not easily done because the text of an audiovisual form is a complex medium. To put the complexity of subtitling, Snell-Hornby (2006: 90) also states that “subtitling is not translating. It’s a lot harder...” Snell-Hornby’s idea of excluding subtitling from translation area might create pretentious responses. However, his statement derives from the fact that he is referring subtitling as a form of intralingual translation, in which the process of subtitling is being referred to as transcription rather than translation (Bartoll 2004: 57). In this study, the focus will be on the interlingual subtitling, or the final information under the screen. Thus, it still makes subtitle as a part of translation; or screen translation, in particular.

Culture and translation have a deep relationship. Here, Pederson (2005) supports the notion by showing up the case of rendering culture in translation through the analysis of Extralinguistic Culture-bound Reference (ECR). Conducting a translation work needs a good knowledge of the language and culture (Nugroho, Nababan, Subroto, 2016). Culture contains life value for certain people which does not belong to other group or society. Soemarno (2003) defines several cultural categories which may cause some problems; they are 1) stereotypes, 2) cultural events, 3) traditional buildings, 4) kinship, 5) pronoun, 6) language level, and 7) idiom. Those categories often cause some untranslatable cultural problems. The proper equivalences are rarely found for the cultural terms. It requires translator’s understanding and knowledge on two cultures to transfer the idea of some cultural
terms, since each language contains unique culture. A translator should have a broad knowledge of the culture of target language to solve the problems of cultural untranslatability (Nugroho, 2016). Luther (in Simatupang, 2000:3) states that “translation is not everybody’s art”. The art can not appear automatically to translate the cultural terms but it should be learnt well. Certain strategies can be applied by a translator to get the subtitling work acceptable and readable.

Swearwords often exist in a film and it causes difficulties in translating them since the cultural values of the target language should be considered by a translator. The swearwords as an emotive function are used to express not only the feeling of anger, disappointment and upset but also the feeling of happiness, wonder and intimacy. The swearwords which are sometimes taboo must be properly translated into the target language without causing any cultural clash. Ullmann (in Gomez, 2012) defines three grand motivations of saying swearwords; they are feeling of fear, feeling of delicacy, and feeling of propriety. In subtitling, a translator should have a deep knowledge of target text’s culture. Indonesian has more variant of swearwords compared to English since there are many traditional words of some regions in Indonesia which become a national word. In the context of contrastive swearwords, there is a different concept of swearwords between English and Indonesian, for example the word ‘anjing’ or ‘dog’ can act as a swearword in Indonesia, but is impossible to be applied in English. These words have a different concept because of their cultural and historical backgrounds.

Wijana (2004) divides Indonesian swear words into some categories; they are 1) unpleasant conditions, 2) names of animal, 3) supernaturalism, 4) unpleasant objects, 5) parts of the body, 6) label of kinship, 7) sexual activities, and 8) improper professions. While, in a previous research of English swearwords by Mattson (2006), she only found five kinds of English swearwords; 1) religion, 2) sex, 3) excrements, 4) sexist terms of abuse, 5) physical and mental handicap. To conclude, there are threefold of difficulties which can be observed in the background of study which make this study even more interesting; they are: 1) difficulties on matching the linguistic element of source subtitle text, 2) difficulties on rendering the swearwords in source subtitle text in the target subtitle text, and 3) difficulties on following the format of standardized subtitle.

2. Methodology

This study was a descriptive qualitative research and it was intended to describe students’ translation of swearwords in the subtitle of ‘8 Miles’ movie. The task of translating the swearwords was given to the students in the class of Translation for Specific Purposes. Twenty students consisting of twelve males and eight females were involved in this project. The observation was conducted during the process of translating those words.

In order to select the translation task, the researchers used written English narrative (captioning) of the dialogues taken from trusted movie portal in the internet. Then, the researchers selected the narrative caption that contained English swearwords. Finally, students were asked to translate the English narrative into Indonesian
subtitles. Prior to translating, students confessed they never saw ‘8 Miles’ movie before.

3. Result

From the pilot analysis of the Source Language (SL) subtitle, the researchers discover the swearwords pattern. The swearwords pattern of the SL can be seen in the following table.

| Table: 1 Swearwords pattern in the SL | Examples | % |
|-------------------------------------|----------|---|
| Sex                                 | Fuck     | 52|
|                                     | Asshole  | 2 |
| Excrements                          | Shit     | 22|
| Sexist Terms of Abuse               | Bitch    | 13|
|                                     | Motherfucker | 6 |
|                                     | Faggot   | 2 |
|                                     | Homo     | 2 |
| God                                 | Damn     | 1 |

Based on the table above, the swearword ‘fuck’ has the highest percentage with 52%. Accordingly, this swearword belongs to Sex category. However, the word ‘fuck’ itself in this context is not always related to sexual practices, but it is used to express anger, happiness, or intimacy.

Secondly, after discovering the swearwords pattern of the SL, these findings are then translated by students. The swearwords pattern of the Target Language (TL) subtitle can be seen in this following table.

| Table: 2 Swearwords pattern in the TL subtitle | Examples | % |
|-----------------------------------------------|----------|---|
| Names of Animals                              | Bangsat  | 23|
| Unpleasant Conditions                         | Sialan   | 24|
|                                               | Pengecut | 5 |
|                                               | Homo     | 3 |
| Unpleasant Objects                            | Kotoran  | 1 |
| Improper Professions                          | Bajingan | 20|
|                                               | Pria/Wanita Jalang | 19 |
|                                               | Banci    | 5 |

Based on the table above, instead of using Sexual activities category to compensate the use Sex category in the SL swearwords, students mostly use Unpleasant condition category in their translations. As seen from the findings, there is no perfect correspondence in translating the SL into TL swearwords. In addition, the
researchers find jumbled pattern in the translation of SL swearwords. It means that, for an illustration, SL swearwords’ Sex category can be translated by using Names of animals/Unpleasant condition/Improper professions category of TL swearwords.

Moreover, the researchers also find a translation pattern utilized by students in translating SL swearwords. This can be seen in the following table.

| No. | Translation Patterns                        |
|-----|--------------------------------------------|
| 1   | SL swearwords are translated into TL swearwords |
| 2   | SL swearwords are translated literally      |
| 3   | SL swearwords are purely borrowed           |

Based on the table above, it can be seen that all students do not have the intention to neglect or delete the SL swearwords. Moreover, there are three implications occur from the respective pattern, they are: 1) students try their best to translate SL swearwords into a corresponding TL swearwords, 2) students do not have sufficient knowledge to mark the meaning and context sensitivity of SL swearwords and put enough effort to find the equivalent TL swearwords, therefore it creates awkward subtitle information, and 3) students do not try hard to find the equivalent TL swearwords by borrowing SL swearwords in their translation, thus it might position movie audience (subtitle readers) at stake. Interestingly, both male and female students do not try to soften or delete the swearwords.

4. Discussion

Based on the findings above, the researchers will expand the discussion into a deeper analysis. The discussion is compartmentalized by using students’ translation pattern parameter.

4.1. SL swearwords are translated into TL swearwords

The translation task shows that students mostly use this strategy in their translation. Students do not hesitate to translate swearwords, even the crudest kind of swearwords. This kind of strategy is actually not fully in line with the broadcasting direction issued by The Broadcasting Commission of Indonesia. Of course, there are occasions when swearwords can be mildly authorized in the subtitle, such as in anger context of situation. The example of this strategy can be seen below.

| Context                                                                 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The swearword is produced by Cheddar Bob and it is directed to Paul. This utterance is intended to response Paul’s statement about Bob’s superior. In this context, Cheddar Bob gets angry to Paul because Paul always annoys his work and Bob’s anger explodes after Paul says that Bob’s superior is waiting for Bob with anger. |

| Source Language | Target Language          |
|-----------------|--------------------------|
| Cheddar Bob: **Fuck you**, homo. | **Bangsat kamu**, homo. |
Based on Excerpt 1 above, some students translate the swearword ‘fuck’ into ‘bangsat’. The SL swearword belongs to Sex category, while the TL swearword is categorized into Name of animal category. According to Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (The Great Dictionary of Indonesian Language), ‘bangsat’ literally means ‘kepinding’ atau ‘kutu busuk’ (‘bed bug’). However, these swearwords are produced to express anger. So, the use of their literal meanings is neglected. As seen from its motive, this swearword aims to intrude delicacy. In this context, Bob explodes his tantrum after Paul teases him through his statement. In addition, Paul’s response to Bob’s swearword also indicates that the atmosphere of this dialogue is intense. Moreover, it is actually appropriate to use swearword in the subtitle, but the TL swearword is too expressive to be broadcasted. In this case, ‘mild’ expression, such as ‘awas!’ can be used to neutralize the vulgarity of expression.

4.2. SL swearwords are translated literally

This is the second preferred strategy after SL swearwords are translated into TL swearwords. The use of this strategy shows that students are not aware by the expressive meaning that the swearwords carry. In addition, if the context does not support the translation, it will result into information awkwardness in the subtitle. The example of this strategy can be seen below.

Table: 5 Excerpt 2

| Source Language | Target Language |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| Jimmy: You didn’t do anything Janeane. It’s my shit. | Jimmy: Janeane, Kamu tidak melakukan apa-apa. Ini kotoranku. |
| Janeane: Please, don’t push me to kill myself. | Janeane: Jangan mendorongku untuk bunuh diri. |

Based on Excerpt 2 above, a student translates ‘shit’ into ‘kotoran’ (‘shit’, ‘feces’). The SL category belongs to Excrements, while the TL is categorized into Unpleasant object. This student is unaware that the swearword ‘shit’ has shifted its meaning in this context. The use of literal translation is not appropriate, since feces are not produced by the speaker. Based on its motive, this swearword is produced when the speaker is still in an unstable psychological condition. Therefore, this swearword is produced to express sadness or anger. In this context, Jimmy feels that his relationship with Janeane needs to be ended. Jimmy needs to do so because he does not want to drag Janeane into a vortex of his problem. However, the termination of their relationship will hurt both sides, because they actually still love...
each other. This problematic situation triggers Jimmy to produce the swearword. Thus, the absence of appropriate translation will only cause confusion for the audience. In this case, the translator can neutralize the swearword without losing its meaning. For example, the utterance ‘You didn’t do anything Janeane. It’s my shit’ can be translated into ‘Janeane, Kamu tidak melakukan apa-apa. Ini masalahku’. The use of neutralized swearword translation in this context is still appropriate and will not confuse the audience, since the contexts of utterance and situation are still the same.

4.3. SL swearwords are purely borrowed

The use of pure swearwords borrowing is the least used strategy utilized by students. By using this strategy, three possibilities occur: 1) swearwords translation might not be understood by the audience at all, for example ‘this is shit, man’ translated into ‘ini shit, bung’ (researchers’ own example), 2) swearwords translation might be awkwardly understood by the audience, for example ‘damn, man’ translated into ‘dannn, bung’ (researchers’ own example) and 3) swearwords are successfully transferred, for example ‘fuck you, homo’ translated into ‘bangsat kamu, homo’ (research data, excerpt 1). Fortunately, the students utilize pure borrowing swearwords that do not jeopardize audience’s comprehension on the swearwords and context of situation. The example of this strategy can be seen below.

Excerpt 3

| Source Language | Target Language |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| Cheddar Bob: Fuck you, homo. | Cheddar Bob: Bangsat kamu, homo. |
| Paul: Wanna Fight? | Paul: Ingin berkelahi, ya? |

Based on Excerpt 3 above, some students translate ‘homo’ into ‘homo’. In this case, the students use the appropriate strategy by borrowing it purely. Here, Bob’s motive in saying this swearword is to express his anger to Paul. This pure borrowing swearword, in this case, is considered acceptable because informal Indonesian language register has acknowledged the use of this term. However, the use of the term ‘homoseksual’ might also be appropriate. The unclipped ‘homo’ swearword (‘homoseksual’) is also semantically suitable because Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (The Great Dictionary of Indonesian Language) only defines ‘homo’ as ‘keluarga famili Hominidae’ (‘a member of Hominidae family’). To conclude, in this case, society convention on swearwords plays an important role in determining their semantic acceptance. The convention of informal language style can determine
the success of swearwords translation and neglect the use of dictionary meaning. In the context of swearword translation, this notion is solid, because most swearwords have shifted their literal meanings into contextual meanings. Thus, dictionary meanings cannot be solely relied upon swearword translation.

5. Conclusion

Based on the findings and analysis, the researchers find three translations patterns (or referred to as strategies), they are: 1) SL swearwords are translated into TL swearwords, 2) SL swearwords are translated literally, and 3) SL swearwords are purely borrowed. Almost all students try to maintain the ‘purity’ of the swearwords. However, in some cases, students’ attempts to maintain the level of expressiveness have the potential to distort the contextual meanings. To expand the discussion on this topic, future researchers can include the analysis of translation techniques, strategies, and quality to investigate movie subtitles.

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