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## The Quality of Translation in Subtitling

### *Abstract*

Assessing the quality of a translation is difficult because the criteria for such an assessment are elusive: different quality concepts as well as varying views on what is stylistically appropriate plus a wide variety of translational approaches make a clear-cut result virtually impossible. The assessment of the quality of a translation – and translation, in this context, refers to the linguistic rendering of a text into another language – is further complicated in the case of subtitling when the translator has to grapple with the many constraints and few opportunities of the audiovisual medium. The present paper will try to find a way through this maze of inter-related assessment criteria, examining for that purpose the subtitles in chapter 14 of *Murder on the Orient Express* and suggesting alternatives where necessary.

### 1 Translation Quality Assessment

In her book *Translation Quality Assessment: a Model Revisited*, Juliane House criticises “the anecdotal approaches to the evaluation of translations” (House 1997: 3) for their frequent emphasis on the belief that

the quality of a translation depends largely on the translator’s subjective interpretation and transfer decisions, which are based on his linguistic and cultural intuitive knowledge and experience. (House 1997: 3)

In other words, the assessment of the quality of a translation should ideally be based on more objective criteria. The problem is, however, that the above-mentioned “neo-hermeneutic approach to translation evaluation can only shed light on what happens between the translator and (features of) the original text” (House 1997: 3). Objectivity is the goal, but it is difficult – even impossible – to attain, translation criticism being “a highly complex and, in the last analysis, probabilistic undertaking” (House 1997: 119). The quality of a translation depends on an intricate network of interrelations between the target text, the source text, their respective text forms, the agents in the translation process (i.e. the client, the translator, and the institutions or organisations behind them), and the cultures and politics involved. Figure 1 provides an overview of the factors that influence the process of translation. With six “petals” enclosing the target text in the middle, the diagram is reminiscent of a flower. We will call it the “translator’s daffodil”:

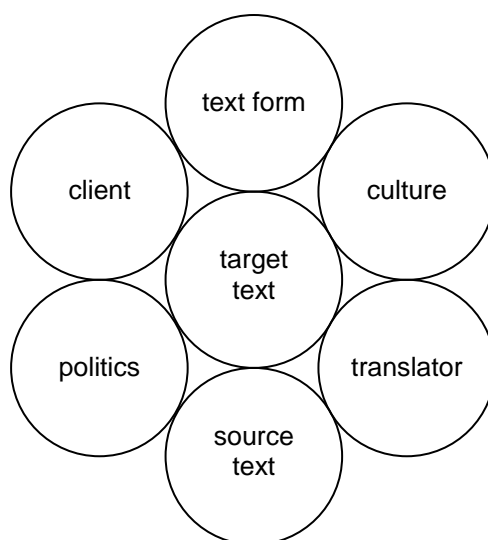


Fig. 1: The "translator's daffodil"

So what does the "translator's daffodil" signify? It is what the translator should be aware of when translating a text. Unlike those diagrams that, in trying to describe the translation process, reveal a dichotomy between the source and target texts and their respective cultures with translation coming in between (for two examples, see Nord 1988/2005: 38-39), the "translator's daffodil" reflects the translator's focus on the target text. It shows the target text at the centre of the "flower" surrounded by six "petals", i.e. the various groups of factors which influence the translation process and which are also in some way related to one another. The reason why any assessment of quality in translation should focus on the target text is obvious: it is here that the quality of a translation becomes manifest.

Still, while the target text is the principal object of investigation, the quality of a translation is considerably influenced by its setting: a translator – usually in response to a translation job commissioned by a client – translates under certain conditions and to the best of his or her ability a source text into a target text, thereby implicitly or explicitly taking into account the form and genre of the text and the fact that the whole process of translation is embedded in a cultural and political context. This is not the place to go into detail about how the quality of a translation can be affected by any of the groups of factors sketched above. Suffice it to say that, in view of a relativism which rightly allows for no invariants in the process of translation (cf. Vermeer 2007: 174), the assessment of any translation involves a great many tacit assumptions – in addition to some rules defined explicitly beforehand.

While the explicit rules might relate to the client's instructions when commissioning the translation and to any cultural and/or political functions specified in the source text and in the target text, tacit assumptions have to be made when we want to account for the more elusive theoretical aspects of translation. These include, for example, the reception of the source text and target text, which is different for each individual receiver in his or her socio-cultural and temporal-historical context. With so many

variables having to be juggled, the quality of a translation can only be established on rather uncertain ground. This is why there is no such thing as absolute quality in translation: a particular translation can be good or bad only within its own relevant framework of clearly defined criteria; often one translation of a source-text sentence will have to be assessed as being *more appropriate* or *less appropriate* than another translation of the same sentence (cf. Kußmaul 2000/2007: 25). Good quality in translation is, then, the *perception* of a translation as most appropriate within the context in which it functions.

While a subjective perspective cannot altogether be avoided when assessing the quality of a translation, it should at least be supported by as much sound objective reasoning as possible: what counts is a critique that is fully comprehensible in every detail of its argument (cf. Schippel 2006: 7). The reasons we give to support one translation and disapprove of another are, then, crucial when it comes to assessing the quality of a translation. Most interesting are those cases where two (or more) alternative translations vie with each other and where each translation has specific advantages and disadvantages. Finding suitable translations for a given source text passage is one thing; listing the advantages and disadvantages of these translations and weighing them against each other is quite another thing. This paper will investigate alternative translations in the highly specific field of subtitling.

## 2 Subtitling *Murder on the Orient Express*

The subtitler Alan Wildblood, quoted by Snell-Hornby, apparently does not see himself as a translator: "Subtitling is not translating. It's a lot harder, but it's a lot more fun" (Snell-Hornby 2006: 90). And it seems that he is not just referring to intralingual subtitles, where the subtitling process is referred to as *transcription* rather than *translation* (cf. Bartoll 2004: 57). For the purpose of this paper, our focus is on interlingual, closed subtitles – such as can be optionally added in the viewer's own language so that he or she can follow the dialogue of a film while listening to it in a foreign language. Alan Wildblood's statement makes sense when we call to mind the principle of (interlingual, closed) subtitling, that is, the reduction of verbal information to written information on the screen. That this process does naturally involve reduction is a logical consequence of the visual and spatial constraints of the subtitle on the screen; and it is due to the fact that the reception of verbal information takes less time than the reception of written information. The art of subtitling, therefore, consists in a condensing of given verbal information, asking the subtitler to weigh individual pieces of that information as to their relevance in a specific film shot, taking into account not only the visual information provided in the shot but the whole range of factors sketched above in the diagram of the "translator's daffodil". Just as in poetry, where the constraints of form render a proper translation virtually impossible, the verbal information to be translated in subtitling is similarly untranslatable (hence Wildblood's statement).

One of the many recommendations and rules given in the code of good subtitling practice as issued by Titelbild Subtitling and Translation GmbH, Berlin (s.a.) states that the translation should be of high quality, allowing for both linguistic peculiarities and

cultural nuances. This aspect of quality will be the focus of this paper. High quality of language, it is true, may sometimes be hard to achieve because of other equally important quality criteria: for the best translation is no use if it violates any of the subtitling rules of space and time. An average viewer reads at a rate of about 2.5 words per second (cf. Díaz Cintas/Remael 2007: 97) so that a subtitle which exceeds the corresponding number of characters for a given maximum duration is likely not to be read in full. In her book *Kulturspezifika im Film: Probleme ihrer Translation*, Sigrun Döring (2006: 29-32) provides a good overview of the techniques used to condense film dialogue into subtitles. We are not so much concerned with how subtitles are *extracted from* dialogue text, but with how they can be *optimised* in view of a given dialogue. The assessment required for such optimisation may draw upon various linguistic concepts such as the concept of connotative meaning (cf., for example, Hervey et al. 1995: 120 ff.), supported by pragmatic argumentation reflecting suitable translation theories.

The 1974 mystery film *Murder on the Orient Express* based on the novel of the same name by Agatha Christie was published in DVD format by Kinowelt Home Entertainment in 2003 (Lumet/Dehn 1974 [2003]). Apart from the original English, the dubbing languages are German, Italian, and Spanish, with a choice between German, Italian, or Spanish subtitles. The settings for our purposes are English with German subtitles. This is the story of the film in a nutshell: Hercule Poirot, the famous detective, is travelling aboard the Orient Express from the Middle East to London, when one of his fellow travellers, the wealthy American business man Mr. Ratchett, who in vain had offered Poirot money to engage his services, is found dead in his berth, stabbed twelve times. After discovering that Ratchett had been involved in a deadly kidnapping, Poirot gradually finds out that the twelve passengers in the coach and the French conductor have a motive for killing Ratchett, because they are in some way or other related to the victims of the kidnapping case. The detective interrogates the suspects and, combining the results with some other factual evidence of the murder, eventually concludes that all twelve passengers and the conductor collaborated in killing Ratchett. In our quality analysis, we will take a close look at chapter 14, the interrogation of Greta Ohlsson, the middle-aged Swedish missionary.

This is the English dialogue together with the German subtitles (the symbol " | " indicates the end of a subtitle line):

- |     |  |  |
|-----|--|--|
| (1) | <b>G. Ohlsson</b> I'm fright.  | – Ich habe Angst.  |
| (2) | <b>E. Beddoes</b> Have no fear, mademoiselle.<br>They all come out looking much more peaceful. | – Sie sehen danach alle friedlich aus.                             |
| (3) | <b>G. Ohlsson</b> Only God can give peaceful.  | – Nur Gott kann friedlich geben.                                   |
| (4) | <b>H. Poirot</b> <i>God dag, fröken Ohlsson.</i>   | – <i>God dag fröken Ohlsson.</i>                                   |
| (5) | <b>G. Ohlsson</b> <i>Nej, talar ni svenska.</i>  | (no subtitle)  |
| (6) | <b>H. Poirot</b> Alas, mademoiselle, that is the extent of my Swedish.                         | Leider beläuft sich mein Schwedisch   nur darauf. Verzeihen Sie... |

- (7) Forgive me if I am personal, but most Scandinavians of my acquaintance are well-educated in other languages. die meisten Skandinavier | sind gut in Sprachen ausgebildet.
- (8) And yet you have difficulty... – Falls Sie Schwierigkeiten haben... |
- (9) **G. Ohlsson** I... I was born backwards. – Ich wurde zurückgeblieben geboren.
- (10) That is why I work in Africa as missionary, Deshalb arbeite ich in Afrika, | als Missionarin...
- (11) teaching little brown babies more backward than myself. und unterrichte kleine braune Babys, | die zurückgebliebener sind als ich.
- (12) **H. Poirot** But I... I see that you have spent three months in America. Were you not able to improve? Sie waren drei Monate in Amerika. | Ging es Ihnen danach nicht besser?
- (13) **G. Ohlsson** I was in... In a mis... I... I... International group. Ich war mit einer | internationalen Gruppe zusammen...
- (14) In... For getting money for African mission from American rich. um Geld von amerikanischen | Reichen für Afrika zu bekommen.
- (15) I... I speak Swedish to big audiences Ich spreche Schwedisch | vor großem Publikum...
- (16) in... In... In Swedish-American institution in Minneapolis im schwedisch-amerikanischen | Institut in Minneapolis...
- (17) and other big cities. und anderen großen Städten.
- (18) In ten weeks, we make \$ 14,000 and... and 27 cents. In zehn Wochen | machen wir \$ 14.000 und 27 Cent.
- (19) **H. Poirot** That's wonderful, wonderful. (no subtitle)
- (20) Miss Ohlsson, how long have you been interested in religion? – Seit wann sind Sie religiös? |
- (21) **G. Ohlsson** From five years. – Seit fünf Jahren.
- (22) In summer, in... I had been sick as always. And I sat in the grass in the garden. Im Sommer, ich war wie immer krank, | saß ich im Gras im Garten...
- (23) And I... I saw Jesus in the sky, Da sah ich Jesus am Himmel...
- (24) *mit* many little children, mit vielen kleinen Kindern.
- (25) but all the children were brown. Aber all die Kinder waren braun.
- (26) So it was a sign for me to look after little brown babies. Also war es für mich ein Zeichen, | mich um braune Babys zu kümmern.
- (27) **H. Poirot** Yes. Were your parents religious? Waren Ihre Eltern religiös?
- (28) **G. Ohlsson** *Ne*, they had no respect for God. No. Nein, Sie hatten | keinen Respekt vor Gott.

- (29) So it was not just a sign, it was also a punishment. Also war es nicht nur ein Zeichen, | sondern auch eine Strafe.
- (30) **H. Poirot** Oh, there, there, there, there. I'm sure that God will forgive you, Miss Ohlsson, and perhaps, which is more important, Ganz sicher wird Gott Ihnen vergeben, | und was noch wichtiger ist...
- (31) so will your father and mother. Ihre Eltern werden es auch.
- (32) Now... (no subtitle)
- (33) ... here is the compartment you share with... Sie teilen dieses Abteil mit...
- (34) **G. Ohlsson** *Ja*, and here is my number seven bed. – Ja, mein Bett ist Nummer sieben. |
- (35) **H. Poirot** Yes, your number seven. – Ja, Ihre Nummer sieben.
- (36) Tell me about number eight. – Erzählen Sie mir von Nummer acht. |
- (37) **G. Ohlsson** Is filled with Miss Debenham, – Es ist besetzt von Ms. Debenham.
- (38) a very nice young lady from Baghdad, Eine nette junge Dame aus Bagdad.
- (39) where she teach English shorthand to children, to forward children. Wo sie nicht zurückgebliebenen | Kindern englische Kurzschrift lehrt.
- (40) **H. Poirot** After the train left Vinkovci, did she leave her berth? Nachdem der Zug Vincovci verließ, | verließ sie da ihr Bett?
- (41) **G. Ohlsson** *Ne*, she sleep just like me. – Nein, sie schlief, so wie ich. |
- (42) **H. Poirot** If you were fast asleep, how could you be so sure she did not leave? – Wie können Sie da so sicher sein?
- (43) **G. Ohlsson** In Shimoga Mission, I can hear snake breathe. I would know. In der Shimoga-Mission | kann ich eine Schlange atmen hören.
- (44) **H. Poirot** Good. And did you leave your room? Haben Sie Ihr Zimmer verlassen?
- (45) **G. Ohlsson** *Ne*, not till morning, in my bed gown. Nicht bis zum Morgen, | in meinem Bettkleid.
- (46) **H. Poirot** Is your bed gown white with red animals? – Ist es weiß, mit roten Tieren? |
- (47) **G. Ohlsson** *Ne*, is *Jaeger*. – Nein, es ist gelb.
- (48) **H. Poirot** And Miss Debenham's bed gown? – Und das von Ms. Debenham? |
- (49) **G. Ohlsson** *Den var em lila*. –Das ist lila.
- (50) **H. Poirot** Oh, like the French "*lilas*", "*lilac*". – Wie im Französischen, "*lilas*"? |

- (51) **G. Ohlsson** *Ja. Just det lila, just det lila.* – Ja, lila.  
(52) **H. Poirot** *Lila, lila.*
- (53) **H. Poirot** Good. And why are you making this trip, Miss Ohlsson? – Und warum machen Sie diese Reise? |
- (54) **G. Ohlsson** Just as always, money, money for mission. – Wie immer, Geld für die Mission.
- (55) **H. Poirot** Good. Good. (no subtitle)
- (56) When this is all over, mademoiselle, I promise that I shall make you an emolument. Wenn dies alles vorbei ist, verspreche | ich Ihnen, entrichte ich einen Obolus.
- (57) **G. Ohlsson** God will find you a reward. Gott wird sie [*sic*] belohnen.
- (58) *Tack så mycket. Tack. Tack.* (no subtitle)

In the following, we will examine a few selected subtitles from the above chapter.

The whole dialogue is characterised by Greta Ohlsson's peculiar and occasionally incorrect English, mingled with some Swedish expressions. This idiosyncrasy does not only serve to reinforce the impression of Miss Ohlsson as a strangely diffident person but also provides the ground on which communicative hitches and incongruities as well as comical touches and inadvertent punning can thrive. The grammatical incorrectness of Miss Ohlsson's English is introduced right at the start – in (1) to (3). While it is not quite clear whether she says "I'm fright" (as indicated in the dialogue script) or rather "I'm frightened", adding the missing syllable in a half-swallowed but voiced nasal release of built-up air-pressure, her taking up Beddoes's expression "peaceful" and using it in a grammatically wrong way must be regarded as a central structural element in this opening exchange. The subtitles in (2) and (3) echo this structure through the repetition of "friedlich", producing a grammatical mistake similar to that in the English dialogue. Still, the subtitle "Sie sehen danach alle friedlich aus" ("They all look peaceful after that") is not ideal, because the deictic function of the word *danach* 'after that' calls for a more explicit point of reference than the implied reference to the previous interrogations. In the absence of such explicit reference, the strong deixis of *danach* could be replaced by the weaker deixis of the synonym *hinterher* 'afterwards'. However, since that might increase the number of characters beyond what is permissible for that line, the sentence needs to be changed, for example: "Hinterher sehen alle friedlich aus" 'All look peaceful afterwards'. Placing the adverb in initial position has the advantage of giving it the emphasis it deserves.

Analysing the two alternatives more closely, we can see that, to be able to use the more appropriate expression *hinterher*, we have omitted the pronoun *sie* for technical reasons. The question that we have to ask now is: what impact does this omission have? Or in other words: what is the difference in meaning between "Hinterher sehen alle friedlich aus" and "Hinterher sehen sie alle friedlich aus"? The answer is: there is no clear difference in meaning; there is at best a difference in intensity. The reference to the previously interrogated suspects expressed through the combination of a



definite (*sie*) and an indefinite pronoun (*alle*) is stronger than the mere use of the indefinite pronoun. Here, the stronger reference is justified because Greta Ohlsson is not the first suspect to be interrogated and Beddoes is seen to immediately usher in the next suspect after he has shown the previous one out. Thus, if we decide to substitute *hinterher* for *danach*, we have to put up with the slightly weaker pronoun *alle* instead of the pronominal construction *sie alle*. Note that to replace *danach* with *nachher* would be to use an even less suitable term, because *nachher* in combination with the present tense connotes a certain time in the near future – which is totally inappropriate in the context. The point, here, is that the subtitler should be aware of such nuances, weigh the respective advantages and disadvantages also in the light of any other relevant aspects, before making a conscious decision in favour of one solution or the other.

The dialogue in (6) reveals a similar disregard for different shades of meaning. Here, the use of the verb *sich belaufen* in “Leider beläuft sich mein Schwedisch nur darauf” ‘I’m afraid my Swedish only amounts to this’ is not idiomatic in the context because *sich belaufen* should be used in connection with a specified amount: e.g. “Mein Schwedisch beläuft sich auf 15 Wörter” ‘My Swedish amounts to 15 words’. The deictic expression *darauf*, however, is too unspecific to permit the use of *sich belaufen*; here, the proper corresponding verb would be *sich beschränken* ‘be limited’. The resulting 38-character line (“Leider beschränkt sich mein Schwedisch”) would probably be acceptable: there is another line of that length in (56) and the time needed for two full subtitle lines (4.12 to 5.20 seconds according to the Titelbild standard) should be just about available. However, in the light of what follows in (6), (7), and (8), we are suggesting another translation.

The sentence “Verzeihen Sie... die meisten Skandinavier sind gut in Sprachen ausgebildet” ‘I’m sorry... most Scandinavians are well educated in languages’ raises the question why Hercule Poirot needs to apologise for the fact that most Scandinavians are well educated in languages. A look at the English original shows us the missing link: “Forgive me if I am personal” is an introductory “stand-alone” apology, one that can be universally used to prepare one’s partner in the conversation for some personal comment or question, whereas *Verzeihen Sie...* – although it does have implicit overtones of getting too personal – fails to specify the reason for the apology and creates meaning only through the probabilistic exclusion of unlikely interpretations. To assist the process of signification and establish rudimentary coherence, the text should at least reflect the intended contrast of *Verzeihen Sie...*, which can be achieved by continuing with *aber* ‘but’. Ideally, though, the subtitle in (6) is modified in such a way as to account for the clause “if I am personal”. Lack of coherence is also the problem in (8): How does “Falls Sie Schwierigkeiten haben...” ‘If you have difficulty...’ relate to Poirot’s previous remarks? How is the sentence supposed to continue? A straightforward translation of the English version is more appropriate here. With a few changes added, we may then tender the following subtitles for the dialogue discussed above:



- |     |  |  |
|-----|--|--|
| (6) | <b>H. Poirot</b> Alas, mademoiselle, that is the extent of my Swedish.                                       | Das ist leider mein ganzes Schwedisch.   Ich möchte nicht persönlich werden... |
| (7) | Forgive me if I am personal, but most Scandinavians of my acquaintance are well-educated in other languages. | aber die meisten Skandinavier   sind gut in Fremdsprachen ausgebildet.         |
| (8) | And yet you have difficulty...   | – Doch Sie haben Schwierigkeiten...  |

With two lines of 38 and one line of 37 characters, the subtitles in (6) and (7) require a duration of at least 4.5, preferably even somewhere around 5 seconds. If such a duration is possible (considering that the onset of the subtitle in (6) does already slightly precede the start of Poirot's "Alas"), then the modifications suggested can be said to improve the quality of the translation. There may well be further room for improvement if the subtitles are rearranged, but that would go beyond the scope of this paper.

Monsieur Poirot's "And yet you have difficulty..." shows his disbelief at the Swedish Lady's poor English. Greta Ohlsson's explanation about having been "born backwards" fails to deceive the detective, who in (12) comes up with another argument why Ohlsson's English should be better than it is. His question "Were you not able to improve?" clearly implies the logical conclusion that, after three months in America, she ought to be quite good at speaking English. The translation of that question in the German subtitle as "Ging es Ihnen danach nicht besser?" 'Were you not feeling better after that?' does not make much sense: it seems to refer to Greta Ohlsson's backwardness, yet is inappropriate even in that context. A proper translation could, for example, be condensed into "Wurde Ihr Englisch da nicht besser?" 'Did your English not improve there?'

In other cases, the subtitler is well aware of the contextual significance of some of Greta Ohlsson's vocabulary. Thus, in (45), he or she translates *bed gown* as *Bettkleid*, echoing the unusual English expression with an equally unusual German term. The unusualness of *bed gown* is crucial here, because Poirot later alludes to it in his explanations of the solution to the case when he says to Miss Ohlsson: "You coined words like 'bed gown', and yet you understand words like 'emolument'." Not a very common word, *emolument* is appropriately translated as *Obolus* in (56). The context in which the words are used is extraordinary both in the English original and in the German translation: while emoluments refer to a salary or reward rather than a donation (as suggested by the context), an *Obolus* is a small contribution given out of an obligation, not voluntarily like a donation. Here, the quality of the subtitle is measured not against the standard of the target language but against the textual and contextual idiosyncrasies of the dialogue.

In (46), Poirot takes up Miss Ohlsson's *bed gown*, repeating the unusual expression so as not to appear to notice its strangeness. The effect is one of subtle comic irony (also reflected in the tone of voice and facial expressions), with each dialogue partner playing his and her specific role. Ideally, the repetition of *bed gown* should therefore be maintained in translation. However, if we substitute *Ihr Bettkleid* for the

pronoun *es*, the resulting subtitle line is a little too long. To preserve the effect of the repetition, one would have to be less specific about the description of the nightdress, for example: "Ist Ihr Bettkleid weiß mit etwas Rot?" 'Is your bed gown white with a little red?'. Although the particulars given in the English dialogue are not crucial to the solution of the murder case, the detailed description of the nightdress ("with red animals") – uncommon as it is – can be regarded as a comical element in its own right. A comparison of the two renderings might yield the following result: while the description of the nightdress as "weiß, mit roten Tieren" is somehow funny, the repetition of *Bettkleid* would have a function beyond drollness, affecting the relationship between Poirot and Ohlsson.

By contrast, the translation in (47) completely ignores the meaning of *Jaeger* in the dialogue text, replacing it with the compensatory adjective *gelb* 'yellow'. This is acceptable because it makes sense in the target text context. The result, however, deprives the communication of a potentially disruptive element: Miss Ohlsson's response in the subtitle is perfectly plausible, whereas the answer in the English dialogue is illogical because the reference to the material of the nightdress has nothing to do with its colour and pattern. To retain the effect of the original, we suggest the following subtitle: "Nein, es ist aus Jaeger-Wolle." Depending on the brand awareness of Jaeger products in Germany, an alternative description for the material of the nightdress may be preferable. Anyway, Greta Ohlsson's skilful disregard for Hercule Poirot's question constitutes one of those tactical moves by which she tries to deceive the detective in his assessment of her personality. The main criterion for the translation of (47) is, then, not a smooth logical communication but a truthful rendering of the communicative stumbling block, even though Poirot chooses to conveniently ignore it.

### 3 Conclusion

The analysis of the subtitles in chapter 14 of *Murder on the Orient Express* has laid bare the shifting ground on which the subtitler has to translate dialogue into subtitles: while in some cases the ideal translation is the result of purely linguistic considerations, in others it follows contextual clues at the expense of semantic appropriateness. The above examples should have made it clear that – beyond any plain issues of right and wrong – the quality of translation in subtitling goes hand in hand with the subtitler's ability to see and address linguistic nuances within the narrow confines of subtitling. Only a subtitler who is aware of the potential meanings in the source and target language can handle them in what he or she has consciously come to recognise as the most appropriate way. This process of conscious recognition, this awareness of what is linguistically possible and desirable in a particular context calls for continuous and meticulous practice – general translation practice as well as specific subtitling practice. It may be argued that "[i]n a world of subtitling where deadlines are often unreasonably short, especially when subtitling DVDs" (Sánchez 2004: 16) there is no time for such minute analyses. While that is certainly true, it is no argument against developing close-reading skills for the source language and word-juggling skills for the

target language, as mastering these skills will minimise the time needed for a good translation.

Another objection might be that, in a million-dollar business with Oscars not just for the best film but for everything from the best actor and the best director to the best visual effects and the best makeup – for virtually everything except subtitles, the subtitles play such a marginal role that a discussion as finicky as the above might seem totally incongruous. Yet, on the other hand, there are apparently those film viewers who would want “to kill the translator” as he or she is responsible for “the movie’s murder by ‘incompetent’ subtitle” (Nornes 1999: 17). Especially, for those films that aspire to recognition as a work of art, any subtitles should be regarded as an integral part of the film as a whole. And in that case, only the best quality can be satisfactory.

To be sure, the kind of detailed analyses discussed above have to be complemented by an equally sound knowledge and mastery of the technical opportunities offering themselves within the confines of the subtitling process: how to best distribute an optimised text so as to match perfect capturing of the time-codes at the beginning and end of each individual subtitle. The extent to which this process varies depending on external circumstances and requirements has been excellently portrayed by Diana Sánchez in her discussion of different subtitling methods (cf. Sánchez 2004). The close focus in this paper on some of the quality aspects of language and context in subtitling is but a humble attempt at highlighting one out of several elements that come together in a good subtitle.

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