

**Ph.D. Thesis Abstract**  
**A Study on the English Subtitling Strategies**  
**of Korean Wordplay**

**Mi-hyung Oh**  
Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Korea

## 1. Wordplay as a subject of study and practice

Wordplay may not be ubiquitous, but it poses universal translational difficulties as the strong connection between its linguistic form and meaning places an extra burden on the translators. Yet, wordplay has remained at the periphery of translation studies, being disregarded as something “not important” and/or “untranslatable.”<sup>1</sup> Even studies that acknowledge the translatability of wordplay have focused mostly on either linguistic features used or humorous effects (Knight 1992; 이도영 1999; 성호주 1983). However, it is easy to overlook the fact that wordplay performs diverse functions. Humor is one of the major functions of wordplay. But wordplay draws the attention of audience/readers in texts such as political speeches and news headlines, and satirizes society in literature and propaganda. In the case of advertising, wordplay effectively stamps brand images on consumers’ minds. Yet, the paucity of research results in a lack of guidelines or practical suggestions for practitioners who may “tone down” wordplay as they believe it is unimportant or untranslatable anyway

---

<sup>1</sup> From the stance that languages dominate thoughts, translation itself is deemed an impossible act. Burnshaw (cited from Cannolly 1998: 173) and Ordudary(2008) point out that it is almost impossible to translate poems as they are in ST. Then, the logical extension would be that wordplay with its focus on linguistic features is harder to translate. Alexieva (1997) and Attardo(2002) also agree that the logical mechanisms beneath wordplay are all different from culture to culture, and therefore, wordplay cannot be easily translated.

(Delabastita 1996: 135). This Ph.D. thesis, based on the premise that wordplay provides a good window into one of the fundamental questions of translation studies, namely the relations between the source text and the target text, aims to examine wordplay in specific contexts, such as subtitling, by analyzing how wordplays are translated and explore strategies that fulfill the intended function of the wordplay in source texts (ST).

## 2. Wordplay and subtitling

There are many types and genres of texts that contain wordplay. Of them, audio-video materials, particularly films, have seen a sharp increase in the demand for translation.<sup>2</sup> Films are of particular interest to us in that they pose unique spatial-temporal “constraints” to translation (Gottlieb 1992; Kovačič 1994; Delabastita 1989). Because of these constraints, subtitles are sometimes condensed, generalized, or even deleted. This in turn requires systematic decision-making on the part of translators. Moreover, films are polysemiotic with not just dialogue between characters but also all other auditory and visual signs generating meaning. This demands a holistic approach to translation in order to deliver the message as a whole package.

In case of wordplay, it is easy and somewhat understandable to make it a prior target for deletion or generalization when spatial-temporal need arises. Yet, it is important to analyze its function in the given dialogue and context before determining translational approaches to preserve original functions. In this process, relevance in Sperber and Wilson’s (1995) sense and “maxim of the sufficient degree of precision” (Kussmaul 1997)<sup>3</sup> should be given full consideration to enable the target text readership/audience to enjoy the same/

---

<sup>2</sup> The Korean-to-English translation of films, which is the focus of this study, has shown a sharp increase in demand as more and more Korean movies are entering foreign markets and receiving awards at international film festivals. With the global film market expected to grow more than 11 % per annum in 2004, the export value of Korean movies in 2005 showed a 364 times rise in 10 years (김현정 외 2006). Besides, in the 2000s, more than 100 Korean films were submitted to various international festivals (영화연감 2001-2008).

<sup>3</sup> Standing against the previous thought that all the components in a given utterance should be reproduced in order for the readers to understand the utterance better, Kussmaul (1997: 92) argued for “the sufficient degree of precision,” meaning translators reproduce just that semantic feature or just those features which is/are relevant in a given context with regard to the function of their translation.

similar function of wordplay. Signs are another dimension that needs to be taken into account in deciding subtitling approaches to wordplay. Though translation can only affect dialogue, not other auditory or visual signs, the audience receives all of them as one single package. Signs, therefore, may be constraints, but they can also be useful materials in reproducing functionally appropriate rendering of wordplay.

### 3. Wordplay subtitling strategies

The data for this Ph.D. research consisted of wordplays and their English subtitles collected from 50 Korean movies. Four professional subtitlers evaluated them and assigned each subtitle a point from 3 to 1, with 3 being the best and also checked if it preserves the information and entertainment value of the ST wordplay.<sup>4</sup> Information is critical in enabling an audience to understand the plot. Entertainment,<sup>5</sup> meanwhile, engages the audience in the movie. These two pillars fulfill the function of the movies: offering a pleasant experience (이정국 1999; 양수련 2007; 황선길 2009).

Although it is ideal to preserve both the information and entertainment values delivered by the ST wordplay, the data revealed that some subtitles of wordplay were evaluated to be functionally appropriate even when they were deemed to have failed to preserve both information and entertainment. This result clearly demonstrates the uniqueness of subtitle translation where decisions are made to accommodate different priorities and indicates some options that are not applicable to the translation of written texts. The analysis of subtitles that were evaluated to preserve both information and entertainment in the ST wordplay showed translational strategies in Table 1.

---

<sup>4</sup> Reliability of the data and the raters were confirmed with Cronbach's  $\alpha$  value and ICC which were 0.938045 and 0.982088791 respectively.

<sup>5</sup> According to Huizinga (김윤수 역 1998), we are "playing man(or *homo ludens*)."  
Play is something not ordinary and does not have connection to material interests. Play encompasses not just simple laughter but all the elements of "entertainment."

Table 1. Translation strategies: Preserving both information and entertainment

Translation strategy		Remarks	Example <sup>6</sup>
Wordplay to wordplay	Literal translation	When the ST wordplay has TL components in it, or is based on universal concepts.	A: I smell a paradise, it smells <u>channel no.5.</u> B: You mean <u>Chanel no 5?</u> (The ST wordplay is based on “channel” and “Chanel.”)
	Modification	Change sounds	When discernable sounds are not heard in the scene.
		Change motives	When motives are not visualized.
Wordplay to non wordplay	Utilization of other language devices	When devices with high visibility such as repetition, rhyming couplets and parody can be used. Provided that such replacement does not contradict audio-video signs.	A: If you wanna do that, change the name. <u>Sharing Love?</u> It’s corny, isn’t it? B: Yes, we like <u>“Making Love,”</u> not <u>“Sharing Love.”</u> (ST presents words with the same ending sound of the Korean version of “Sharing Love.” The TT wordplay utilizes rhyming couplet of “sharing” and “making.”)

<sup>6</sup> Examples are actual subtitles taken from the movies. Grammatical mistakes and others are all transcribed as they are in the data.

Translation strategy		Remarks	Example
Wordplay to non wordplay	Utilization of auditory and visual signs	When signs other than the dialogue can support offering of information or entertaining elements of wordplay.	A: English idioms, put up with, <u>bear stand</u> . They always come out on tests, so memorize them. Here is an easy way to memorize them. Imagine <u>a bear standing</u> . The bear stands, so... (This scene comes with a standing bear whose sexual organ is also standing. Although TT does not contain wordplay, it can still preserve sexual connotation with the image of the bear.)
	Replacement	When information is not in the referential meaning of wordplay.	A: Question # 7, across. Author of " <u>Gone with the Wind</u> " B: I know this one. What's her name. Wait. Maybe it's <u>Clark Gable</u> . A: Which one? B: I'm not sure. Ah! She's the one who tells the story. <u>Vivien Leigh</u> . (ST is about the name of an actor and a soap opera that he appeared. It is to show how ignorant the character is in an entertaining way. TT does not have any materials used in ST, but still provides information about the character and does it in a similar way.)

Table 2. Translation strategies: Not preserving both information and entertainment

Translation strategy		Remarks	Example
Wordplay to non-wordplay	Translation of contextual information	When the priority is on readability for audience to understand the scene.	A: You are now here. Don't forget that. <u>Why are you causing troubles</u> on your first day, bitch? Are you trying to <u>get yourself killed?</u> (ST utilizes "shovel[ing[literal translation of the Korean wordplay, vulgar expression of doing needless things]" and "digging." TT provides what these expressions mean in the given scene.)
Deletion		When the priority is on readability for audience to understand the scene. Provided that sounds or motives used in wordplay do not appear in audio-video signs.	(answering the phone) Hey. Didn't I tell you not to call me? What are you rambling on about, <u>you little shit!</u> (Gets angry and hits one of his gang members) <u>I mean did I ever ask for anything else?</u> (ST uses an "acorn" for "little." An acorn in Korean means both little and cyber money. The last line of ST reads "Did I ask for an acorn or a skin" [another popular cyber item]. TT deletes the acorn itself and the wordplay based on it.)

Some subtitles have failed to preserve both information and entertainment, but they were evaluated to be good in quality. The analysis of such cases revealed two translation strategies shown in Table 2. The first strategy, translation of contextual information, is to offer information needed to understand the scene. The second strategy is deletion, which may not be a strategy at all. But, the analysis showed that it is a working and justifiable solution in subtitling as Nornes (1999) and Kovačić (1996) said. In subtitling, spatial-temporal constraints require readability<sup>7</sup> to be the prior consideration in many cases.

When a specific strategy is to be chosen, the given wordplay should be understood in terms of the information and entertainment value it provides with the *skopos* (Nord 1997) of the TT as the overarching frame. The *skopos* of movies is to offer pleasant experience to the audience by delivering the plot in an easy-to-understand way and by entertaining them. Once the information and entertainment value of the ST wordplay are understood, translational strategies can be chosen, from literal translation to creation of TL wordplay, to replacement, or even to deletion as the analysis of the data showed. In this process, readability and synchronization with auditory and visual signs need to be given full consideration as they are critical requirements of subtitles.

Although further endeavors should be made to see how actually translators make decisions with regard to translational approaches, the value of this study is its exploration of wordplay and subtitling, which have been in the periphery of translation research and its examination of practical translation strategies applicable to subtitling of wordplay.

---

<sup>7</sup> In subtitling, readability is not just how the text is fluently and naturally written. It is also about whether the subtitles provide enough time to audience to read them, how much information is given on the screen at one time. It also includes legibility including fonts, style, and etc. (Gambier 2003).

---

## References

- Alexiava, B. (1997). There must be some system in madness: Metaphor, polysemy, and wordplay in cognitive linguistics framework. In Delabastita, D. (ed.), *Transductio. Essays on Punning and Translation*. Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 137–154.
- Attardo, S. (2002). Translation and humor. An approach based on General Theory of Verbal Humor(GTVH). *The Translator* 8(2): 171–192.
- Cannolly, D. (1998). Poetry translation. In Baker, M. (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*. London: Routledge, 170–176.
- Delabastita, D. (1989). Translation and mass–communication: Film and T.V. translation as evidence of cultural dynamics. *Babel* 35(4): 193–218.
- Delabastita, D. (ed.) (1996). *Wordplay and Translation*. Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing.
- Gambier, Y. (2003). Introduction screen transadaptation: Perception and reception. In Gambier Y. (ed.). *The Translator Studies in Intercultural Communication: Screen Translation* Oxford: St. Jerome Publishing, 171–189.
- Gottlieb, H. (1992). Subtitling—a new university discipline. In Dollerup, C. and A. Loddegaard (eds.), *Teaching Translation and Interpreting: Training Talent and Experience. Papers from the First Language International Conference, Elsinore, Denmark, 1991*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 161–170.
- Knight, M. (1992). The happy adventure of translating German humorous verses. *Meta* 37(3): 474–481.
- Kovačič, I. (1994). Relevance as a factor in subtitling reductions. In Dollerup, C. and A. Lindegaard (eds.), *Teaching Translation and Interpreting 2: Insights, Aims, Visions. Papers from the Second Language International Conference*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 245–252.
- Kovačič, I. (1996). Reinforcing or changing norms in subtitling. In Dollerup, C. and V. Appel (eds.), *Teaching Translation and Interpreting 3: New Horizons. Papers from the Third Language International Conference, Elsinore, Denmark, 1995*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 105–109.
- Kusmaul, P. (1997). Comprehension processes and translation: a think-aloud protocol study. In Snell–Hornby, M., Jettmarová Z. and K. Kaindl (eds.), *Translation as Intercultural Communication*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 239–248.
- Nord, C. (1997). *Translating as a Purposeful Activity: Functionalist Approaches Explained*. Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing,
- Nornes, A. M. (1999). For an abusive subtitling. *Film Quarterly* 52(3): 17–34.
- Ordudary, M. (2008). Problems of rendering linguistic devices in Rumi’s poetry. *Translation Journal* 12(2). Retrieved from <http://translationjournal.net/journal/144rumi.htm> on 13



January 2009.

Sperber, D. and Wilson, D. (1995). *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn.). Oxford: Blackwell.

김현정 외(2004). 『세계 영화시장 규모 및 한국영화 해외 진출 현황 연구』. 서울: 영화진흥위원회.

성호주(1983). 한국어의 언어 유희: 동음이의어의 말놀이(pun)를 중심으로. 『한국학논집』 10: 59-75.

양수련(2007). 『영화 시나리오 100분의 창작술. 시나리오 oh! 시나리오』. 서울: 북스토리.

영화진흥위원회(2001-2006). 『한국영화연감』 통권 제23-28호. 서울: 커뮤니케이션북스.

이도영(1999). 유머 텍스트의 웃음 유발 장치. 『텍스트언어학』 7: 421-445.

이정국(1999). 『생생한 현장 강의 이정국 감독의 시나리오 창작 기법』. 서울: 지인.

호이징아, J. (2003). 『호모 루덴스』 김윤수 역. 서울: 까치.

황선길(2009). 『영화, 애니메이션 시나리오 작가를 위하여-영상문학, 영상언어』. 서울: 시그마프레스.  
레스.

---

***Author's e-mail address***

mihyungoh@hufs.ac.kr

***About the author***

Dr. Mi-hyung Oh earned her Ph.D. in Translation Studies from Ewha Womans University. She has taught undergraduate courses in interpreting at Ewha Womans University and is currently affiliated with the Dept. of English Interpretation & Translation of Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul, Korea.