

A Study on the Difficulties of Subtitling from English to Sinhalese

Amaya Nanayakkara¹

Subtitling is the process of translating spoken dialogues into written text on the screen. Subtitling consists of the production of snippets of written text to be superimposed on visual footage near the bottom of the frame while an audiovisual text is projected. Subtitle translation for screen is considered to be difficult due to certain limitations such as dialogue speed, screen width and text length. This study aims to analyse the difficulties bound with subtitle translation and the strategies that are employed to overcome them with reference to the language transfer from English to Sinhalese. A qualitative methodology is employed in carrying out the research where the English source script and the translated Sinhalese script of the movie “Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone” is compared. Through the analysis of the gathered data, it could be identified that the difficulties that occur in subtitle translation can be divided into two categories; linguistic and cultural. As far as the linguistic difficulties that are evident in subtitling are concerned, lengthy and complex sentences which have the components of the sentence (subject, verb and object) distributed among several video frames for longer time durations and short and simple sentences which have semantically deeper meanings that cannot be conveyed in Sinhalese through a sentence with an equivalent length within the respective time duration make the task of subtitle translation challenging. As far as the cultural difficulties that are evident in subtitling are concerned, translating the cultural terms related to the fantasy wizarding world including the terms that are related to ecology, material and social culture, gestures, customs and concepts appear to be challenging to translate. It could be observed that the translator has employed several strategies in overcoming the above challenges of translation. The lengthy sentences are translated phrase by phrase sticking to the source language sentence structure; SVO, disregarding the target language sentence structure; SOV to keep up with the dialogue speed. This measure, which has been successful in most instances, at times sound unnatural in Sinhalese as well. The meanings of short sentences with deeper semantical value that cannot be described in a sentence with an equivalent length in Sinhalese are generalized in order to make them fit in with the time duration of the source utterance. This measure delivers a rather distant sense of source idea in Sinhalese without being completely unfaithful to the Source. As for the strategies of rendering culture bound terms, new Sinhalese equivalent terms are created for specific cultural items. For the terms that are too difficult to be recreated in Sinhalese, the original English term is used with additional descriptive subtitles presented within brackets in a different colour as a measure to make the ideas closer to the audience. By following the above strategies, the linguistic and cultural difficulties that had occurred during the process of subtitle translation are adequately addressed.

Keywords: Audiovisual translation; English; Film translation; Sinhalese; Subtitling

¹ Department of Linguistics, University of Kelaniya, Dalugama, Sri Lanka, amaya95d@gmail.com