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Translation Technologies

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Comparison between English-Spanish subtitles: Cultural referents present in one episode of The Good Karma Hospital

The topic of this paper is to make a comparison between the subtitles in English and Spanish of the episode 4 of season 1 of the British TV series *The Good Karma Hospital*, with emphasis in some of the cultural referents that are present in this episode. The purpose is to explain why they are important, why they can sometimes be translated in different ways depending on the context and which translation would be the best for each case. The importance of this topic lays in the fact that the cultural referents, as their name says, represent a culture, and when translating them you have to transport one culture to another one and so, this translation can’t be literal, but based on the meaning. Moreover, what has one meaning in one culture can have a different meaning in a different culture, so translating these referents can be very problematic and prone to errors. This paper aims to contribute at identifying some cultural referents, study them, understanding why they are problematic for translation, and explain how to correctly translate them.

*The Good Karma Hospital* is a medical drama TV series that premiered in 2017 and is under British production. It follows the life of the doctors of the Indian public hospital called *Good Karma Hospital* and some of the people that are present in the life of these doctors. The main character is Ruby Walker, an English doctor that decides to apply for a job in this hospital, where she finds Lydia Fonseca, the medical director. Other doctors are Ram Nair and Gabriel Varma, which are both from India (Carr, 2020 & Power, 2018). Other important characters are Greg McConnel, the owner of a bar in the beach and boyfriend of Lydia, and Paul Smart, a British tourist that went to India with his wife and decided to stay and befriended Greg.

In the fourth episode of the first season of *The Good Karma Hospital* there are five main stories and three of them end up forming one. First, there is a British tourist, Vicky, who goes to this hospital puking and not being able to stay on her feet. She hates India and is happy when Ruby is her doctor, because she is British, too. Ruby discovers that Vicky had a kidney transplant not too long ago, but Vicky is hiding it, so she asks for help to doctor Varma. He concludes that the transplant was very recently, in India, and illegal, so he confronts Vicky, and she reacts very poorly.

A second story in this episode is between Paul and Greg, when they meet for the first time and start being friends. Paul lives with his wife on the beach, and he hates India and is very worried because his wife is dying of cancer, so he goes to this bar for a drink an relax a little.

The last three stories, which end up forming one, are, first, the one of the patient Rajit Dave, a street cleaner that is run over by a car and since he doesn’t have money and the hospital doesn’t have a vascular surgeon, has to have his foot amputated. The second of these stories is about Varun Kapoor, one of the best vascular surgeons in Mumbai, and friend of Doctor Nair. And third, the story of Bina Barros, a famous Hindu singer that is going to perform in the marriage of Kapoor’s daughter. Bina is an addict and goes to the Good Karma Hospital for drugs, but they refuse to give her any, so she goes to Greg’s bar, drinks until she can barely walk and then tries to walk to the matrimony. Doctor Nair goes to Kapoor’s house to greet him and when going back to the hospital, he sees Bina Barros unable to walk and perform, so he decides to take her back to the hospital and call Kapoor to come get her. When he arrives, Ruby sees his car and realizes he is the one who ran over Rajit and, along with Lydia, she uses that information to force him to repair Rajit’s foot instead of amputating it.

This series allows us to follow the life of different people and is influenced by two different cultures, the Indian and the British, so it has several cultural referents. These referents have been defined by several authors, one of which is Vermeer, who says they are a social phenomenon of a culture A which is considered relevant by the members of that culture and when compared with an equivalent social phenomenon of a culture B it is found that it is specific of the culture A (as cited in Luque, 2009, p. 25). Another author that defines them is Molina, which explains them as a verbal or paraberval element that has a specific cultural load and when in contact with a different culture through translation can cause a cultural problem between source and target texts (as cited in Rodríguez, 2009, p.2). In conclusion, the cultural referents represent the elements of a specific culture which differentiate that culture from another and this difference can cause discrepancies between these cultures.

Since these referents can be problematic in translation, there are several strategies for translating them. Ramière (2006) and Martínez (2015) explain these strategies, the first of which is *borrowing*, which is a lexical or grammatical adaptation from one language to another and the original referent adapts to the phonology of the target language without interpretation or translation. The second one is *calque*, in which the target language adopts the concept and the morphology of the syntagm and the elements of the referents are translated literally. The third one is *explanation*, which explains the referent on order for the audience to understand it. A fourth one is *explicitation*, in which the referent is translated with another term that is more accessible to the target culture, and explicits the nature of the original referent by hyperonymy or hyponymy. The fifth one is *coined equivalent*, where the term that is utilized in the translation is equivalent to the original, according to the dictionary or usage. The sixth strategy is *omission*, in which the original referent is eliminated. A seventh strategy is *addition*, where a cultural referent specific to the target culture is added to the translation in order to compensate for a loss in the original referent or to make it closer to the target culture. An eighth strategy is *lexical creation*, which mainly occurs when the original referent is made up, so in the translation another referent is made up for the target culture. One last strategy is *cultural adaptation*, which can take three different forms. In this strategy the referent is adapted to the needs and realities of the target culture, because it is assumed that if not, the viewers wouldn’t be able to understand it. The first of its forms is *limited universalization*, in which the original referent is substituted for another of the same culture that is more accessible for the target culture. The second form is *absolute universalization*, in which the original referent is substituted by another with less cultural load and, therefore, is more neutral. The third and last of its forms is *cultural substitution*, which substitutes the original referent for another one that is specific of the target culture.

In order to do this case study, first we collect the subtitles for this episode, in both English and Spanish. Both subtitles were extracted from the website Tusubtitulo (<https://www.tusubtitulo.com/show/2957>) and are the subtitles for the same version of this episode, which is ORGANIC. It is important to note that this website is dedicated to translate subtitles by fans, so the subtitle in Spanish has several translation errors that allows to better see how problematic can be to translate cultural referents for a native speaker. Then, they each were saved in a .docx document and uploaded to YouAlign (<https://youalign.com>) in order to retrieve a .htm document with both subtitles aligned, which allows to compare them and better study them. This .htm document is in the Annex. Later, the cultural referents were identified, through watching the episode and reading the subtitles in English, and the alignment allowed for the translation of these referents to be extracted. There were eleven referents identified, and three of them were chosen to analyze in this case study, with the criteria of which ones had an interesting translation that can give room to explanation and analysis. Following is a table with each cultural referent in English, the time that they appear in the subtitle, its translation in the Spanish subtitle and the time where it appears in that subtitle. Those that are **in bold** are the ones that were chosen to analyze in this case study:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Number | Cultural referent in English subtitle | Time in English subtitle | Referent in the Spanish subtitle | Time in Spanish subtitle |
| 1 | Hit and run | 4:54-4:56 | Atropello y fuga | 4:54-4:56 |
| 2 | Lord Ganesh | 7:21-7:23 | Señor Ganesh | 7:21-7:23 |
| **3** | **Bloody hell** | **12:33-12:35** | **Maldita sea** | **12:34-12:37** |
| 4 | Yam Yam | 13:02-13:05 | Yam Yam | 13:03-13:06 |
| **5** | **I call it as I see it** | **23:41-23:45** | **Yo lo llamo como lo veo** | **23:43-23:46** |
| 6 | Not fit to lick their boots | 24:19-24:21 | No le llegas ni a la suela de los zapatos | 24:20-24:23 |
| 7 | Fame and fortune takes a heavy toll sometimes | 27:13-27:18 | La fama y la fortuna lleva una pesada carga a veces | 27:15-27:19 |
| **8** | **You’ve brought me gold. Now I’ll show you how to spend it** | **28:36-28:40** | **Me has traído oro. Ahora te mostraré cómo gastarlo** | **28:37-28:41** |
| 9 | Kangaroo court | 28:49-28:50 | Juicio amañado | 28:50-28:51 |
| 10 | Glancing blow | 30:57-30:59 | Golpe de refilón | 30:58-31:00 |
| 11 | The servants | 31:09-31:13 | Los criados | 31:11-31:14 |

After this selection, the analysis of these cultural referents will consist of writing the original referent, explaining it, identifying its difficulties for translation and, finally, how to better translate it.

1. Cultural referent nº3: Bloody hell

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, *bloody hell* is “a rude way of expressing great anger” (Cambridge Dictionary, bloody hell), and according to The Merriam Webster Dictionary, it is a British informal and offensive expression used to express anger or annoyance (The Merriam Webster, bloody hell). This is the way in which this referent is interpreted in the translation, because *maldita sea* is used as an offensive expression in Spanish to express anger, too (Real Academia Española, maldita sea). But, in this scene this cultural referent is not expressing anger, and this is more obvious when checking the dialogue:

Paul: I need a drink.

Greg: Then, sir, you have come to the right place.

Paul: I’ll be the judge of that. I want a warm pint, a proper beer, in a straight glass.

Greg: Sadler’s?

Paul: **Bloody hell**.

Greg: Allow me.

Here, Paul is asking for a beer, but very specifically, for a *good* beer, and Greg suggests a Sadler’s, so Paul says *bloody hell* and judging for that reaction, Greg is content enough to serve him that beer. So, more than anger, what Paul is expressing is surprise, he is impressed, and the translation doesn’t reflect that. The technique that the translator used was coined equivalent, but by dictionary, not by usage, and the problem is that in this case, the usage and dictionary definition are not equivalent, which results in a translation that doesn’t express the same as the original. So, a better translation for this cultural referent would be also a coined equivalent, but by usage, not by dictionary, an expression that expresses surprise, too, like *guau* would be, for example.

1. Cultural referent nº5: I call it as I see it

According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, this cultural referent is an idiom that has the meaning of “to state one’s opinion in an open, honest and direct way” (The Merriam Webster, call it/them like one sees it/them). It is a common English expression and in Spanish there is a common expression that has this same meaning, which is “yo digo las cosas como son” or a variation of it. But the translation in the Spanish subtitles is “yo lo llamo como lo veo” which is not a common expression, and it turns out awkward, because *llamo* isn’t really a word that one would use in this context. So, even if it has a similar meaning in a literal sense, it doesn’t reflect the reality of the original, because it’s not an expression commonly used, and it doesn’t have the same figurative meaning. The technique used here was the calque, because it was translated literally, word by word, when a coined equivalent would have been a much better technique, resulting in the common Spanish expression “yo digo las cosas como son”.

1. Cultural referent nº8: You’ve brought me gold. Now I’ll show you how to spend it

This referent is not an expression widely used, really, in English, but the word *gold* in it allows us to understand the meaning of it. In English, *gold* is an expression that refers to a positive situation (Urban dictionary, gold, 6), and there is also the expression *go for gold*, which is similar to this referent, and it means “going for something higher than your usual low standards” (Urban dictionary, gold, top definition). In the series this expression is used to refer to something that gives them the opportunity to solve a big problem they have, and so, to raise their standards. The second part of this expression means that the person who’s talking will take this opportunity to actually solve their problem.

The solution of the translation is “me has traído oro. Ahora te mostraré cómo gastarlo”, which doesn’t mean anything in Spanish, really. It doesn’t make any reference to a better situation or solution, unlike the original, so it doesn’t have the same meaning, nor works. The translator opted for a calque, when an absolute universalization would have been better, because it allows the viewer to understand the expression by making it less foreign. So, a better solution would have been translating it by the meaning, as “tenemos una solución. Ahora te voy a enseñar qué hacer”.

As we can see, cultural referents are problematic to translate, because they are elements of a culture, and translating them means taking them to another culture, which can make them harder for a translator to understand, since they are from different cultures, and will most likely lose something in translation, whether it be meaning, sense or the culture itself. Because of this, they are highly sensitive elements in translation and so, they have to be studied when translated. This is also shown in the fact that they are hard to translate for native Spanish speakers, even when they have an equivalent, highly used and common expression in Spanish. Finally, they can’t be translated with just one technique, there are several techniques that can help to translate them, and different cultural referents require different techniques.

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Annex:

Eng-Esp subtitles The Good Karma Hospital alignment: <https://bit.ly/30UpJzF>