Dänische Delikatessen. Linguistic Changes within the Translation of Titles

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The translation of cultural titles, e.g. of books or films, creates linguistic changes and fixed patterns. But what changes and why? In this paper the relation between intra- and extra-translational changes is examined, and the main reasons found for these modifications are: a) audience nursing and b) economic interests. The sheer existence of a possibility for change is responsible for the changes analysed. The translation situation creates a new possibility for modifying the title, and this situation is very often exploited, even if there is absolutely no linguistic or cultural motive for it: external powers change the titles.

Key words: titles, cross-linguistics, translation, Danish-German-English, patterns, constructions

La traduction des titres culturels, comme par exemple des titres de livres et de films, déclenche souvent des modifications linguistiques dont on peut identifier les paradigmes fixes. Mais qu’est-ce qui est modifié et pourquoi ? La relation entre des modifications intra-traductionnelles et extra-traductionnelles est examinée. Les raisons principales de ces modifications sont: a) les soins portés aux destinataires et b) des intérêts économiques. A l’origine des modifications est l’existence même d’une possibilité de changement. Le contexte traductionnel offre une nouvelle occasion pour modifier le titre et l’occasion très souvent saisie même s’il n’y a absolument aucun motif linguistique ou culturel qui l’exige. Des forces externes ont le pouvoir de changer les titres.

Les mots-clés : titres, linguistique comparée, traduction, danois-allemand-anglais, configurations, constructions

Introduction

Titles of cultural products (books, films, plays, songs, paintings and the like) are often translated into foreign languages. A number of significant tendencies can be observed with respect to differences between the original title and the translated title. Which are more exactly the linguistic characteristics of these differences? And – bearing in mind the core focus of this volume – is there anything safe and solid to conclude about the intentions behind them? These questions are under investigation in the following paper.

The background of this piece of research is a large project on interlingual title issues within the language trio Danish, German and English which I started working on several years ago. The aim of
the project is to survey cross-linguistic, cross-medial, diachronic and translational matters on a large scale, drawing on a multilingual title corpus created for this specific purpose.¹ Some of these titles and their comparees share a translational relation, others do not. As such, the motivational question does not play a core role in the ongoing project, but it nevertheless provides the basis for some interesting conclusions about the possible agents responsible.

First, the article provides an overview of some of the most significant interlingual modifications found in title translation. Second, it looks at evidence of possible motives with regards to modification in title translation. Before summing up, a methodological discussion evaluates the key problems of the investigation.

**The Linguistic Concept Title**

Titles belong somewhat to the niche research objects of translation studies, at least outside the context of paratexts. In many Translation Studies text books, for example in Stolze, Gerzymisch-Arbogast, and Hjørnager Pedersen, respectively, to mention just a few examples, one does not find a single word about the specific problems of title translation, or they are, like in the case of Hansen, only mentioned as a problem, but not systematically explored or described.²

One of the most prominent researchers into title translation, Christiane Nord, states that titles are a “Textsorte” (text genre) covering book titles and the headings of non-independent parts-of-texts like chapters.³ But are titles really texts? Evidence suggests that this is not necessarily the case. On the contrary. Texts share at least one feature and that is syntactical and communicative independence. Titles may be “relatively finished”⁴ in a rather vague, non-defined way, but they are not, as texts, complete utterances in the sense of possible autonomous authentic speech acts. “You only talk in texts,” as Hartmann has put it.⁵ That includes, for instance, one word utterances like ‘Help!’ (also a title by the way), and proverbs like *Every cloud has a silver lining*. But you cannot talk in titles. The
main reason is that titles are not complete utterances, but components of an utterance. As such, they may carry well-known basic syntactic functions like noun phrases (Les Miserables, Der Untergang, Dallas), or prepositional phrases (In Rainbows, About a Boy, Für Elise), but even when they do constitute a sentence (We are the World, Je t’aime, Così fan tutte), they are still not complete utterances. So what are they?

Titles are first and foremost names, that is, they are signs referring uniquely to a specific entity, in this case a piece of cultural work in the broadest sense of the word. Titles refer to objects like books and films, to mention just two of those categories being highlighted here. Hence, I define the concept “title” in this context as: a comparably short onomastic representation of a creative work.

**Some Tendencies in Title Translation**

After having introduced the object itself, let us turn to some of the most significant effects of title translation. There are basically 3 different ways to translate a title:

1) One possibility is to simply keep the original title intact, thereby importing the foreign title as a ‘loan title’ or ‘import title’ as one could put it. We may illustrate this in almost the shortest possible way by using Stephen King’s novel It as an example: in many languages, such as Spanish, Portuguese and Italian, the import technique is in fact used in this case. There seems to be some sort of southern Romance convergence on this account.

2) The second type is direct translation, which is in both relative and absolute terms dominant in the case of the aforementioned novel It. A number of actual translations are, for instance, Het (Dutch), Ça (French), Ono (Russian), Eso (Mexican Spanish), Es (German), To (Polish), Az (Hungarian), and Tas (Lithuanian), that is the third person singular pronoun in each language, respectively.
3) A third solution is to modify the form of the existing title in some way. Systematically, modification may cover everything from the slightest addition or omission of an article (e.g. *The Shining* becomes *Shining* in German, where the definite article is often removed when importing), to a complete change. The latter is found in the Danish translation of *It*, where the title *Det onde* [The Evil] was chosen. Thus, the three Scandinavian languages happen to represent exactly the three different possible solutions (Norwegian: *It*, Swedish: *Det*, Danish: *Det onde*).

The reason behind the remarkable Danish divergence from the general pronoun pattern is to be found in a blocking effect: Danish culture already has a book carrying the title *Det*, namely a 1969 novel by Inger Christensen. The blocking effect can be observed outside translational contexts too: when Nicholas Pileggi’s book on the mafia, *Wiseguy* (1986), was transformed into a screen play, a television series already had taken that title and was hence blocking it. The solution was what came to be another classical title, namely *Goodfellas*. The non-exclusiveness of translational motives for title changes is an important point of this article.

What are then the main linguistic patterns that arise through title translation?

**More Formulaicity**

The title corpus shows that translated titles are basically more formulaic than original titles. The term ‘formulaic’ is in general associated with Wray although it is in fact much older and the field is more systematically elaborated under the German concept *Phraseologie*. I use the term ‘formulaicity’ to focus on the tendency that translated titles to a larger extent than original titles reproduce already coined formulations or even established multi word units. As for empirical evidence, one way is to watch out for formulaically translated titles and then compare them with their original titles to see whether the translation process itself is responsible for the formulaicity.
Formulaic titles may be more substantial or more schematic. Substantiality is a measure of the lexical “fullness” of a construction: back to back is substantial, whereas the + COMPARATIVE + the + COMPARATIVE is a quite schematic construction in that it contains two syntactically restricted slots instead of concrete words. Often, titles are combinations of both, as in the title formula Im Zeichen [In the Sign …] + GENITIVE ATTRIBUTE. A lot of German translated titles turn to this formula, such as:

1662 – Im Zeichen der Inquisition for La carne e il diavolo [The Flesh and the Devil](1992)
Im Zeichen der Jungfrau [In the Sign of the Virgin] for January Man (1989)
Im Zeichen der Libelle [In the Sign of the Dragonfly] for Dragonfly (2002)
Im Zeichen der Lilie [In the Sign of the Lily] for La Miracle de loup (1961)

In the film database OFDb (Online Filmdatenbank, see Bibliography) there were at the time of research 26 German film titles containing this formula, almost every-one of which was a translation. Literary instances show an equally strong tendency towards this construction which is not unknown outside translation, but it is definitely more significant there.

A schematic variant of the formulaic title is a specific German torso-like title construction often containing omission marks which exhibit a number of subvariants:

[…] + CONJUNCTION + MAIN CLAUSE:

... denn sie wissen nicht was sie tun […] because they don’t Know what they are Doing] for Rebel without a Cause (1955)

... und der Himmel steht still […] and the Sky Stands Still] for The Innocent (1993)

... und ewig siegt die Liebe […] and Infinitely Love Wins] for History is Made at Night (1937)

... und knallten ihn nieder […] and [they] Shot him Down] for Guns of Diablo (1974)
The modification of the original title could hardly be more radical, and it seems that this pattern is quite conventional in German.

An extreme example of translational formulaicity is provided by Woody Allen’s films in Danish, which carry remarkable formulaic titles. In many languages the 1969 film title *Take the Money and Run* is translated more or less directly:

*Prendi i soldi e scappa* (Italian)
*Toma el dinero y corre* (Spanish)
*Prends l’oseille et tire-toi* (French)
*Та pengarna och stick!* (Swedish)
*Хватай деньги и беги* (Russian)

But this does not prevail in Danish. Here the title is *Mig og moneterne* [*Me and the Benjamins*]. This is a semi-schematic multi word unit (*Me and* + *NOUN PHRASE*) which was already established as such at the time of the cinema release. In fact, a number of older Danish films carry this form of title. However, the unit has almost become the linguistic signal of ‘a Woody Allen movie’ in Danish, as the following list attests:

*Mig og Bogart* [*Me and Bogart*] for *Play it again, Sam* (1972)
*Mig og fremtiden* [*Me and the Future*] for *Sleeper* (1973)
*Mig og revolutionen* [*Me and the Revolution*] for *Bananas* (1971)
*Mig og Annie* [*Me and Annie*] for *Annie Hall* (1977)
*Mig og Afrodit* [*Me and Aphrodite*] for *Mighty Aphrodite* (1995)
*Mig og Melody* [*Me and Melody*] for *Whatever Works* (2010)

As for the king of neurotic New York cinema, Woody Allen himself offers a stunning example of *interlingual* title change. The film that eventually ended up carrying the title *To Rome with Love*
was in Allen’s imagination first referred to as *Bop Decameron* and later on as *Nero Fiddled*, that is, titles with heavy classical and musical connotations and close to zero formulaicity. After the intervention of financial interests though, the title was changed once again, thereby exchanging the subtle references and cultural-historical load with formulaicity and clear pop-cultural references.

Formulaicity is an important part of normal language, but titles seem to attract it even more, and translation then takes formulaicity one step further. One reason is that formulaic language is a secure solution – at least so it seems. It may have drawbacks for instance on the aesthetic level. But much more important is probably the motive of financial interest and (as a vehicle to this) audience nursing.

**Higher Degree of Intertitularity**

Titles often seem to refer intertextually to other titles. But one should be aware of the fundamental difference between real intertextuality and what one could call ‘pseudo-intertextuality’. Real intertextuality is at play when a title intentionally points at a pre-text with some motive.\(^\text{11}\) That is, for instance, the very obvious case of a sequel (or prequel), that is a follow-up (or pre-pairing, respectively) of a film in a trilogy like the *Star Wars* films following the debut in 1977.

In other cases, the already mentioned term ‘intertitularity’\(^\text{12}\) is more appropriate. That is, when a title just refers to another title, not because there is some kind of content coherence between the two cultural products or because somebody wants to comment on the older product. Quite often, the title just exploits the existing title as a mere linguistic resource so as to give the reader something to recognize or feel safe about – i.e. the ‘audience nursing’ aspect already mentioned – which is why the characterization ‘pseudo-intertextuality’ is appropriate. It seems that this is even more significant and widespread when it comes to translated titles.
Obvious instances of translated title intertitularity are cases like *Manche mögen’s reich* [Some Like it Rich] for *Quatre étoiles* [Four Stars] (2006) with the translated title exploiting the pre-title *Manche mögen’s heiß*, which is the quite close German translation of the original title *Some Like it Hot* (1959). There are no indications of real intertextuality between the latter and the former title. It seems to be a merely formal play, exploiting a schema already used dozens of times, including such examples as:

*Manche mögen’s geheim* [Some Like it Secret] for *Hot enough for June* (1964)
*Manche mögen’s prall* [Some Like it Thick] for *C.O.D.* (1981)
*Manche mögen’s anders* [Some Like it Different] for *The Treat* (1998)

If we look at the figures, we observe a clear pattern: the intertitular titles are much more frequent as translated titles than as original titles. In 80% of the cases, based on the OFDb database, we are dealing with translated titles.

**More Transparency**

The term ‘transparency’ in linguistics is used in different ways. One of them is a measure of the extent to which the sign – and titles are of course also semiotic signs – at the expression level reflects the content level in some way. In this context, I understand transparency as something that can be associated both to content or genre or to a combination of both. The Woody Allen original title *Annie Hall* is a typical example of a non-transparent (= opaque) title with respect to content and genre. We only get the information that a female, probably English speaking person plays a role in the film. This is not untypical (see also *Carrie* below): such titles show a higher tendency to undergo radical changes when translated than more descriptive titles, even though the surplus of information is an extra service to the new recipients, which the source language recipients do not get. Both the Danish (*Mig og Annie* [Me and Annie]) and the German translation (*Der
Stadtneurotiker [The City Neurotic] of Annie Hall\textsuperscript{15} are among such radical modifications. The surplus of transparency is not equal in the two cases, though. The Danish title is, apart from its signal ‘Woody Allen’, at the same time rather genre transparent, as it signals ‘relationship’ too, while the German pendant Stadtneurotiker adds content, being semantically more heavy than just a woman’s name.

Genre transparency is more widespread in certain genres than in others, such as war movies, sex movies, science fiction movies, action movies, and horror movies. The reason for this is probably that films within these genres do not in general count among ‘art works’: what mostly counts is the thrill, and there is no reason to hide this intention. Or the audience simply enjoys the formulaic quality of these productions (formula fiction).

Genre transparency is furthermore much more significant in translated than in non-translated titles. Quite transparent with respect to genre is for instance the onomatopoeion Chop, Chop, which more clearly than the original title Fukssvansen [The Handsaw], (Danish, 2001) signals splatter (comedy). Similarly, after Jonathan Demme’s Silence of the Lambs was renamed Ondskabens øjne [Eyes of the Evil] in Danish, Kubrick’s The Shining received the modified title Ondskabens Hotel [Hotel of the Evil], a title obviously much more transparent with respect to genre than the original.

**Longer Titles**

The title length may be measured in several ways: for instance by the number of words, sentence members, or letters. In the work of Nies Glaap and Gösmann, title modifications in connection with translation are often identified as expansions.\textsuperscript{16} When we analyze our cross-linguistic corpus, we observe a clear picture: the translated titles are frequently longer than the original titles. This is mainly due to one reason: in a number of languages, such as German and Italian, there is a long
tradition of hybrid titles,\textsuperscript{17} that is a combination of the original title and an explanatory expansion connected by a dash:

\textit{The Departed} – Unter Feinden [Among Enemies] for \textit{The Departed}

\textit{Goodfellas} – Drei Jahrzehnte in der Mafia [Three Decades within the Mafia] for \textit{Goodfellas}

But there are also non-hybrid titles that contribute to this pattern, such as the title of the Chaplin movie \textit{The Kid} which is called \textit{Das Kind und der Vagabund} [The Child and the Tramp] in German. Another example is Steven Spielberg’s \textit{Jaws} (1975) which is in itself rather cryptical: whose jaws, which context? The translated title in fact answers such questions: \textit{Der weiße Hai} [The White Shark]. Also the German translation of the pre-war title \textit{King Kong} (1933) is much longer than the original, namely \textit{King Kong und die weiße Frau} [King Kong and the White Woman]. The motive is clear: sexual and racist undertones in order to sell the film better. But why did this intention not play a role in the original version too? Again, the mere translation step offers a new possibility to explicate contents to the new audience, which the original US readers and spectators did not get.

Even small changes contribute to this pattern: the Scorsese movie \textit{Raging Bull} (1980) starring Robert de Niro was slightly modified for the German audience, as \textit{Wie ein Wilder Stier} [Like a Wild Bull]. Apart from the indefinite article missing in the original title, the difference is here the comparative element \textit{wie} meaning ‘like.’

Exceptions may be found, though: for instance the Kubrick movie \textit{Dr. Strangelove, Or how I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb} (1962) is shortened in German which omits the ‘to Stop Worrying and’ part: \textit{Dr. Seltsam oder: Wie ich Lernte die Bombe zu Lieben} [Dr. Strange, or: How I Learned to Love the Bomb]. That is artistically hardly optimal because the length of the title is evidentially part of the creative intention. In this vein, the Austria German title is closer to the original idea, even though it has undergone a semantic change to a higher degree of generality:
The general explanation for the overlength tendency of translated titles is that the wide-spread attempt to narrow down and explain difficulties or subtleties of the original title basically demands more words than the technique: original title + X.

**Status so Far**

To sum up: translated titles show a number of formal characteristics that may be described in greater or minor detail. On the most general level, the tendency can perhaps be narrowed down to this: simplification and explicitation.\(^{18}\) As has been obvious throughout the analysis, there is often an overlap between the categories, which are in fact non-complementary perspectives rather than reciprocally excluding each other. There is a connection between transparency and length: the longer a line, the more information can be transferred. Likewise, intititularity affects length, whereas formulaicity triggers genre and content transparency.

**Methodological Issues**

Now let us turn to some methodological considerations. When working with large-scale data, we cannot spend days or weeks in archives or with other intensive studies as this would make impossible the whole idea of quantitative research. In many cases we just need to make a judgment whether a title alteration might be due to one reason or the other. Often, this is completely uncomplicated. But we have to accept the trade-off between the two types of research, micro- vs. macro-studies (large-scaled data), namely, on the one side, qualitative research with solid conclusions, but little generalization; and on the other, quantitative research with generalizations, but less solid data interpretation.
That is, we face many cases in which we are quite capable of judging whether an alteration is due to language internal or external reasons without being forced to trace the distributional history of the medial product in-depth. In the case of the film title *Carrie* and its German translated title *Carrie – des Satans jüngste Tochter* [Carrie – The Devil’s Youngest Daughter], there is hardly any doubt about the motives. The expansion of the original title *Carrie* is an attempt to give the new audience an idea of what awaits them. In the case of the original title, no such information is given at all. It could be almost any genre.

As to the parodic horror movie *Dänische Delikatessen* whose original title is *De Grønne Slagtere* [The Green Butchers], thereby referring to a Danish charcuterie trade mark) the intention can probably also only be analyzed in one way: the German recipient would be intrigued by the national adjective to watch the movie as an explicitly Danish product – a frequent trick to attract the quite large scandinavophile part of the German audience, as the following examples attest:

*Die dänische Dorfkirche* [The Danish Village Church] for *Landsbykirken* [The Village Church] (1947)

*Wo sind die süßen Däninnen?* [Where are the Sweet Danish Women?] for *Mazurka på sengekanten* [Mazurka on the Bedside] (1970)

*Faul im Staate Dänemark* [Rotten in the State of Denmark] for *Hvordan vi slipper af med de andre* [How we get Rid of the Others] (2007)

Or such alternative titles as:

*Heiße Girls aus Dänemark* [Hot Girls from Denmark] for *I jomfruens tegn* [In the Sign of the Virgin] (1973)

*Die Olsen-Bande: Dänemark wird ruiniert* [The Olsen Gang: Denmark is going Bankrot] for *Olsenbanden overgiver sig aldrig* [The Olsen Gang never Give up] (1979)

Following the classical foreignization vs. domestication dichotomy of Venuti, *Dänische Delikatessen* is an instant of the former. A counter example might be the domesticating *Oh, diese Mieter* [Oh, these Tenants!], the German Democratic Republic translation of the 1970s television
serials *Huset på Christianhavn* [The House in Christianshavn]. The German title omits the name of the Copenhagen location, which was at that time a poor and run-down place unknown not just to the German communist audience but to non-Danes in general, and instead generalizes the subject of tenants.

**Motives**

Now, what is the motivation behind overall patterns like these? How does it influence title translation in such a way that patterns like the ones described arise? Whose interests are served by simplifying/expliciting a title? I can only give a brief overview on this matter,

The motives for title change within translation belong to quite different categories some of the most significant of which I will sum up as follows:

1. Linguistic differences and preferences: Here I have already pointed out the German omission of the definite article when importing English titles (*Shining*).

2. Blocking effects: I mentioned the instance from Danish where *It* was retitled *Det onde* [The Evil] in order to avoid conflict with an already existing title.

3. Market interests and general audience nursing: this may also have to do with political-cultural sensitivity. After having done audience research on three overseas markets, Russia, Ukraine, and South Korea, Paramount Pictures decided to truncate the title of the 2011 movie *Captain America: The First Avenger* on a number of local markets in order to avoid negative response to the film, resulting in the title *The First Avenger*. The trouble was caused by the highly patriotic name in the main title.

Of the motive types for title change mentioned here, the first and the second could be termed title intrinsic matters, whereas the third is a title extrinsic matter: here, the title is seen as a motor or an
obstacle for the consumption of a product. When scanning the sub-corpus of the project containing only modified titles, there is no doubt that the third motive is the far-most dominant motive for change.

**Concluding Remarks**

There are a number of significant linguistic patterns in title translation: 1) translated titles are often more formulaic than original titles; 2) translated titles are in general more transparent with respect to content and/or genre of the referent than are original titles; 3) translated titles are to a higher degree intertitular than original titles; 4) translated titles are frequently longer than original titles.

In general, these tendencies can all be contained within one statement: simplification and explicitation are normal side effects of translation in general, but title translation probably takes them a little further. Thus, most of the tendencies point in the same direction. These findings, of course, only pertain within modified titles.

One may in some cases be able to quite thoroughly examine singular instances of title translation on the micro-level focusing on agents and come to a close understanding of the agents’ motives and intentions. But this does not work on a large scale. A methodological compromise between the two extremes, that is systematic archive research on the micro-level and constructing abstract types on the macro-level might therefore be a workable balanced combination: a deep and broad study into agent types and motivational types. After that, a much better basis for judging the motives of title changes on a large scale would be established.

We know that title translation quite often creates changes to the title, and that these modifications belong to a certain type of change which I have described above. In many cases we can also point out the basic motive for the modification. As has been shown in a series of case studies apart from this volume, the financial interests of the target language distribution company, publisher or the like
are mostly responsible. Other agents seem to play a rather marginal role, even the translator. Motives other than financial reasons can be observed: I have pointed at blocking effects as in the case of *It (Det onde)* in Danish.

Changing titles not only takes place in connection with language-crossing. *Media* crossing also provokes changes for which ‘intermedial title change’ is an appropriate term. *Når snerlen blomstrer* [When the Bindweed Blossoms] is a Danish juvenile love story. The book title does not signal love or any other part of the content elements for that sake. When a film version was made, the title was changed, and the result was the formulaic *Tro, håb og kærlighed* [Faith, Hope and Love]. Whenever a cultural entity is transgressing a border, be it linguistic, be it medial, the title will as a minimum be subject to considerations about whether or not it suits the purpose of some agent(s). Most of the motives explaining title translation are not exclusive to translation but pertain within intralinguistic title change as well.

Even if there is no language change involved, title ‘translation’ may still take place. That is for instance the case when pluricentric languages like English are involved. The Harry Potter book titled *The Philosopher’s Stone* on the British market did not satisfy the US publisher’s house Scholastic Press so they retitled the book *The Sorcerer’s Stone*. This was not based on any sociolinguistic difference between the two varieties of English: *The philosopher’s stone* is a well-established concept in the US as well as in Great Britain. The consideration here is strictly reader group and sales oriented: *sorcerers* are well-known creatures to the computer gaming infantry, *philosophers* less. That made *Sorcerers* the better choice to the overseas publisher. In the same vein, other pluricentric languages like Spanish, French and German select diverging title versions within the specific variety of the language.
The translation of titles is to a large extent a financial-political issue and only to a small extent a linguistic one. The original title ideas of authors, film makers and other artists are quite often altered before publication in order to satisfy investment interests and not to overload the audience with strange names and subtle references. This happens surprisingly frequently along with title translation. In many cases the changes made cannot by any means be explained by linguo-cultural divergence. Instead we must stick to external interests and the power of agents with a less idealistic-artistic and more pragmatic perspective on the matter. This stresses the importance of looking closer at the interaction between translation and socio-economic issues.

Notes

1 This does not implicate, however, that other sources may not contribute. In fact this goes also for the study I present here. It only means that the corpus is the main and often also the initiating source for the investigations.
4 Christiane Nord, Einführung in das funktionale Übersetzen, p. 909.
9 Harald Burger, Dmitrij Dobrovolski, Peter Kühn and Neal Norrick, eds., Phraseologie/Phraseology - Ein internationales Handbuch zeitgenössischer Forschung (Berlin: de Gruyter [Handbücher für Sprach- und Kommunikationswissenschaften, 28], 2007).
12 Christiane Nord, Einführung in das funktionale Übersetzen, p. 909.
15 Annie Hall in fact follows the same pattern as that shown earlier in the article. The originally intended title was Anhedonia, a term addressing the inability to laugh. But the fear of intellectual overload made the production company convince Allen to use a lighter title. (if you have a reference for this information please add it here and in the bibliography.

Bibliography


