

TRANSLATING FILM TITLES: BETWEEN LANGUAGE CONVERSION AND NAME COINAGE

ALINA BUGHEȘIU

Technical University of Cluj-Napoca,
North University Centre of Baia Mare, Romania

Abstract: The paper analyses the translation of film titles from English into Romanian in the context of globalisation and multiculturalism, from the perspective of translation studies, onomastics, semantics, and semiotics. With the help of concepts and precepts pertaining to the aforementioned fields, the research aims at exploring how certain film titles can be viewed as new names (novel linguistic signs) based on their specific semantic content and behaviour. Regardless of their lexical-semantic status, film titles prove to be cultural mediators, facilitating the communication of *meaning* (i.e., social, ethical, political, economic, etc. values) from the source language and culture to the target ones.

Keywords: film titles, onomastics, name coinage, semantic content, cultural mediator.

1. Introduction

The 2003 edition of the Cannes Film Festival saw the premiere of *Dogville*, a film written and directed by Lars von Trier, starring Nicole Kidman and Paul Bettany among other prominent figures of American and European cinema (Sklari 2004: 47). At the time, Lars von Trier had already established himself as a household name in the European film industry with films like *Breaking the Waves* (1996) and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), which enjoyed unanimous critical acclaim for directing, acting, and setting alike. And on all these levels, *Dogville* has always left audiences and critics in a mixed state of awe: rather than choosing sides and being either appalled or fascinated, viewers seem to be both. Lars von Trier's "wildly thrashing hand-held camera work" (Sklari 2004: 47) keeps specialised or amateur film-watchers in constant alertness from the debut sequence and the first words spoken by the often "condescending British voice-over narrator" (Sklari 2004: 47), voiced by John Hurt, until the closing credits "accompanied by a montage of Depression-era and contemporary photographs of poor, homeless, desperate citizens of the United States, while David Bowie's 'Young American' plays on the soundtrack" (Sklari 2004: 47).

However, it was not just the topic and its approach what captured everyone's attention. The set aesthetic, designed by Anthony Dod Mantle, was a key point of interest. It consisted of a "highly stylised soundstage that resembled a blackboard. The town was outlined and labelled in chalk: Elm Street, Old Lady's Bench, the Dog. The only

props were sparse furnishings and partial walls” (Pinsker 2004; see Figure 1). *Dogville* provided the basic architecture, which took on the role of mediator (a kind of *mise en abyme* mediation) and left the rest to the viewers’ imagination.

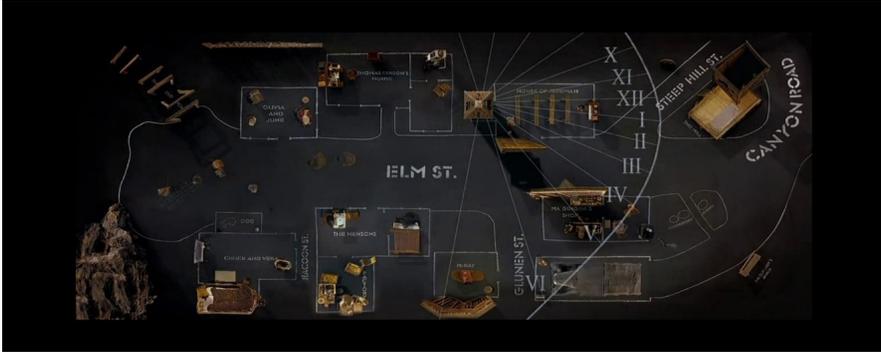


Figure 1. The set of *Dogville* (2003). Source: IMDb (*Dogville*, 2003, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0276919/mediaviewer/rm2270793217/>)

As a part of the multimodal system of communication represented by films in general, film titles fulfil a similar role. They are verbal cues which together with the slogan, poster, trailers etc. make up the interface that helps viewers get acquainted with the complex world of the film and sometimes introduces them to a culture and language different from their own. The paper bears in mind this status of film titles, and consequently analyses them in the context of multiculturalism within an interdisciplinary framework found at the juncture of translation studies, onomastics, semantics, and semiotics. The aim is threefold: 1) to investigate whether, in certain situations, the translation of film titles may be considered to lead to the coinage of new names of films; 2) to explain how the target-language titles function, from the viewpoint of semantics and semiotics, in relation to the original titles, on the one hand, and the films they designate, on the other; 3) to point out why film titles can be considered cultural mediators. The approach is qualitative rather than quantitative, as the object of this research is to describe the various phenomena, not to provide a statistical appreciation of their dissemination. Nevertheless, for illustration purposes, the paper relies on English film titles and their Romanian translations, as included in two specialised databases: *IMDb: The Internet Movie Database* and *Cinemagia*.

2. Film titles as objects of translation

Despite the collective effort that goes into the choice of film titles (they are based on the joint decision of producers, directors, and distributors – see Ross 2013: 259) and their importance in creating a positive first impression of films on potential viewers, film titles have not received extensive attention in translation-related literature. The focus is generally oriented towards script translation, as the largest part of any given

cinematic discourse. Moreover, it is worth noting that the translation of film titles is yet to become the subject of a monograph (with the exception of dissertations, such as the one mentioned by Ross 2013: 248) which would offer a more comprehensive theoretical perspective. Due to this drawback, names of films have also been interpreted as a subcategory of titles of works of art in general. In this context, the translation of film titles has widely been viewed as an instance of the translation of artwork names (see Nord 1993; Ballard 2011; Lungu-Badea 2013, 2017).

When film titles do make it to the limelight of specialised studies, they are approached mainly with respect to “categorising and illustrating the procedures used in translating (mostly American) foreign titles” (Ross 2013: 247) into Chinese (Lu 2009; Ding 2016), French (Negro Alousque 2015), Polish (Surdyk and Urban 2016), Romanian (Bugheșiu 2020), Russian (Gudeleva and Sudarkina 2017; Ermolenko *et al.* 2020; Krasina and Moctar 2020), Spanish (e.g. Martí and Zapater 1993, Santaemilia-Ruiz and Soler-Pardo 2014), and Turkish (Ross 2013). One cannot overlook the tendency towards interdisciplinarity in analyses which deal with the translation of film titles in connection with cognitive linguistics (Peña-Cervel 2016), relevance theory (Díaz-Pérez 2014; Negro Alousque 2015), and advertising (Yu 2018), to name but a few.

The methods and strategies identified in the rendition of film titles from English into any of the aforementioned target-languages range from zero-level translation to marked reinterpretation (see Bugheșiu 2020), depending on the extent of the alteration to which the original title is subjected. Thus, according to Negro Alousque (2015: 238–239) one can come across titles which undergo one of the following types of translation:

- zero translation: *Caroline, Cold Mountain, Salt, Wanted*;
- literal translation: *Bridesmaids – Domnișoare de onoare, The Tourist – Turistul*;
- adaptation: *Dirty Pretty Things – Viața în Londra* (literally ‘life in London’);
- adaptation correlated with cognitive operations (e.g. comparison, resemblance, strengthening, mitigation, echoing, expansion, reduction etc.). *Happy Feet – Mumble: Cel mai tare dansator* (‘Mumble: the best dancer’) is an instance of adaptation with strengthening: “A is a point in a scale and B is an upper-level point in the same scale” (Negro Alousque 2015: 238), wherein A is the title in the source language, while B is the title in the target language.

Similarly, upon treating titles as a part of the paratext of a film (cf. Genette 1997: 210), Surdyk and Urban (2016: 166–168) delineate several translation processes:

- reproduction/transference, including transliteration/transcription, so the mechanism can also be called *non-translation*: *Blue Valentine, High Fidelity, Joker*;
- graphic adaptation/naturalisation, “the reproduction of a title with slight adaptation for understandability, easier pronunciation or for reasons of cultural adaptation” (Surdyk and Urban 2016: 167): *Troy – Troia*;
- literal translation/“through-translation” (with possible changes in word/sentence order): *Inception – Începutul, Mirror Mirror – Oglindă, oglinjoară, Pride and Prejudice – Mândrie și prejudecată*;

- functional equivalence: *The Ghost Writer* – *Marioneta* ('the puppet');
- paraphrase/description/definition (for instance, when titles consist of abbreviations that may not be understood by the target audience; see Surdyk and Urban 2016: 167): *S.W.A.T.* (2003) – *S.W.A.T.* – *Trupe de elită* ('elite troops');
- expansion (the original title + explanatory addition): *De-Lovely* – *De-Lovely – Povestea lui Cole Porter* ('the story of Cole Porter');
- reduction: *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* – *Tigru și dragon* ('tiger and dragon');
- free (creative) formulation: *The Contender* – *Persona non grata*.

Ross (2013: 249) draws up an inventory which resembles that recorded by Surdyk and Urban (2016), with slight variations. However, he talks about translation *tactics* (instead of *mechanisms, procedures, processes, strategies*). According to Ross (2013: 263, endnote 4), by *tactic* one "refers to a (conscious or automatised) routine employed on a local level during a translation", whereas *strategy*, for example, "denotes a more global approach to a translation task".

3. Translating vs renaming in the case of film titles

Yu (2018: 1658–1659) lists some of the factors that influence the translation of a film title: the understanding of the source language, the amount of cultural information included in the film title, the limitations of the target language and culture, and the advertising function of titles. On certain occasions, the interplay of the above-mentioned variables determines the use of the method of free translation, and retitling as its variant. According to Yu (2018: 1662), "This method is a way to get rid of the original film title completely, in fact, to recreate a new name for the movie". Krasina and Moctar (2020) see retitling in terms of an "as if" process: a translation that gives the impression of renaming. The employment of such a strategy is underpinned by intra- and extralinguistic reasons: the presence of culture-specific words or proper names in the source title, or ethical/legal matters that the use of (a part of) the original title might cause. The end result "must meet certain imperative criteria. It is indispensable for a film title to be intelligible by the target language audience, it must have a logical connection with the storyline of the film" (Krasina and Moctar 2020) and, naturally, the title must display marketable potential. From this viewpoint, the translation of film titles is similar to that of advertisements (Yu 2018: 1659; see also Surdyk and Urban 2016: 176). It is actually the commercial dimension of film titles that makes up the fundamental principle of their translation: just like the film itself or the other elements of the cinematic paratext (Ross 2013: 246), the film title has to sell. From this viewpoint, film titles behave like trade names (brand names in particular), which are associated with "a set of specifically cultural meanings and mental constructs connected with a brand" (Corbu 2009: 61, originally Romanian; see also Bugheșiu 2011: 42–43). Thus, the translation of titles is not only the job of a professional translator, but more often than not it is also carried out by advertising experts, film producers and distributors (Ross 2013: 248). When having to decide between preserving the exotic, foreign element of an original title and sacrificing the link of the source signifier with the signified in view of obtaining

a commercially meaningful title, the latter option is sure to be adopted (Ballard 2011: 175, 177). It helps reduce viewers' interpretation effort (Ballard 2011: 177; see also Gallois *et al.* 2005: 128) by providing them a cue for the intended construal of the film. Nevertheless, regardless of the translational approach adopted in their cross-linguistic transposition, film titles are cultural mediators which facilitate the communication of various values from the source language and culture to the target ones.

The advertising function of translated film titles accounts for their lack of semantic fidelity with the source title: "Very often, in fact, we analyse the titles of foreign films released as if they were a matter of translation adaptation, or even as a tragedy from the translation point of view, and perhaps it simply derives from an advertising issue or a sheer commercial decision" (Santaemilia-Ruiz and Soler-Pardo 2014: 210). As a matter of fact, Surdyk and Urban (2016: 176) underline that "As far as titles are concerned, fidelity takes on a different meaning, whereby the translator does not have to be loyal to the original text, but rather to the overall filmic experience (which is not always achieved)". From this perspective, whenever the slightest modulation is involved the translation of film titles ceases to be a "faithful' reproduction" of the original name, seen as "an ideal form and content to which one should aspire" (Santaemilia-Ruiz and Soler-Pardo 2014: 196). Thus, *stricto sensu*, "Translation is perhaps a misleading term" (Surdyk and Urban 2016: 165).

Lexically speaking, film titles consist of one word or complex structures (phrasal/sentential) that *identify* and (at least on the level of name givers' intentions) *individualise* films as forms of sociocultural manifestation within the category to which they belong (i.e. cinematographic productions). Therefore, these structures function as proper names. According to Van Langendonck (2007: 3), "[...] proper names are bestowed almost only on entities that are visible and that one wishes to highlight and which therefore deserve an *ad hoc* name. Typically, such entities are persons, animals, places, buildings and institutions, firms and brands, currencies, languages and dialects, i.e. entities that play a role in people's daily life and communication".

Nevertheless, film titles are not prototypical names, such as personal and place names (Van Langendonck 2007: 6–7; Lehrer 2006: 758; see also Oltean 2013b: 5), due to the often intentionally retrievable asserted lexical meaning of the underlying word/construction. When analysed together with the other elements of the paratext and with the film itself, the meaning of the expression used as a film title will contribute to the overall message that the creators of the cinematic production wish to convey. As such, they are unconventional names (Felecan 2014: 19–20), despite the prototypical conventionality of their legal status: film titles are recorded in official documents and seek to meet regulations regarding intellectual property rights (see Bugheșiu 2020: 121–125). Still, in sentences like "*Winter's Bone* was nominated for an Oscar in the Best Picture category" and "I saw *Enchanted* last night", the use of *Winter's Bone* and *Enchanted* is proprial: they have a purely identifying purpose. According to Coates (2006: 30), "It is possible to use expressions to refer without recourse to any sense (lexical content) they may appear to have, that is, to refer senselessly, since there

are expressions which uncontroversially have no lexical content and may yet refer successfully. To refer senselessly is to invest expressions with properhood, i.e. to onymize them. Properhood, at its most fundamental, simply *is* senseless referring”.

One of the consequences of the “Pragmatic Theory of Properhood” is the untranslatability of the names: “If they have no semantic content in some language, then there is nothing that can be expressed in another” (Coates 2006: 33). Therefore, the underlying process is “not translating but substituting names which are conventionally equated in different languages” (Coates 2006: 33). As it has already been shown, the *conventional equation* may range from the literal translation of a signifier to its creative reformulation: *The Fighter* > *Lupt[torul, The King’s Speech* > *Discursul regelui vs Enchanted* > *Magie in Manhattan* (literally ‘magic in Manhattan’), *Winter’s Bone* > *Mâinile tatălui meu* (literally ‘my father’s hands’). Thus, it can easily be noticed that “One may translate the etymological source of a name and use it as a name in the new language, but one does not translate the name itself in its capacity as a referring or denoting expression” (Coates 2006: 34). Source language and target language film titles identify the same referent at different actual worlds (Soames 2002: 23). Therefore, they are coreferential names whose substitutivity is valid (see Oltean 2013a: 373).

The lack of lexical sense does not imply that film titles are completely devoid of meaning. As with all proper names, the words underlying film titles and used in this capacity “carry with themselves some measure of additional associations” (Smith 2006: 20). They actualise the name giver’s intention for the name user to interpret the cinematic act of communication in a specific manner. At the same time, the associated meaning depends on name users’ “knowledge or image we already have of the thing named”, “the symbolic associations carried by the word itself from other contexts in which the word occurs”, and “the emotive appeal of the word, its sound and/or visual appearance” (Smith 2006: 21–23). At least two of the above-mentioned mechanisms can be seen in the following examples. *The Hurt Locker* was distributed in Romania under the name *Misiuni periculoase* (literally ‘dangerous missions’), a generic phrase identifying the cause of the effect to which the English expression refers. The original English phrase pertains to the American military slang and dates back to the Vietnam War: *in the hurt locker, in the hurt bag, in the hurt seat* meant “in trouble or at a disadvantage; in bad shape” (Zimmer 2010). The English name could also be inspired by the title of a poem written by Brian Turner, which refers to the author’s service in Iraq. According to Zimmer (2010), “It’s a terse summation of the ‘world of hurt’ in which Explosive Ordnance Disposal units often find themselves. The phrase has a claustrophobic feel, as if soldiers are trapped within the confined space of a military gear locker”. Similarly, *Flags of Our Fathers*, which refers to the six U.S. marines who raised the flag atop Mount Suribachi during the Battle of Iwo Jima, in World War II (IMDb, “Flags of Our Fathers (2006)”), became *Steaguri pline de glorie* (literally ‘flags full of glory’). This option shifts the focus from the characters (in the original title) to the effects of the activity illustrated by the plot (in the Romanian title). These examples prove that certain film names are the result of transcreative strategies, rather than mere

translational processes (see Iaia 2015: 129), which aim at rendering a product meant for global dissemination relevant to the linguistic and cultural communities actually targeted (eventually, adaptation of linguistic form entails adoption of different values: cultural, social, economic, etc.). Thus, multiculturalism emerges not as a result of globalisation, but of *glocalisation*: “*Glocalisation* means that global and local features reach their meaning and identity only in relation to each other. Local is not a counterpoint to the concept of global but rather an aspect of globalisation, and globalisation is a kind of hybridisation process” (Sjöblom 2013: 4).

3. Conclusion

Albeit brief, the theoretical excursion made on this occasion aimed at filling in a gap in the bibliography, which usually looks at film titles either as objects of translation, or as names (even if seldom so). As such, both types of approach are incomplete: the former because it takes the sociocultural background into consideration too markedly, the latter because it tends to view names abstractly, outside discourse. However, there is the need for a more practical research that would show to what extent name substitution is used in relation to English film titles as opposed to “non-translation”, and if the same claims can be made with respect to Romanian films distributed internationally or only in English-speaking areas. The impact of globalisation (homogenisation – see Santaemilia-Ruiz and Soler-Pardo 2014: 212), localisation (naturalisation) and glocalisation has to be taken into account upon analysing the aforementioned results. Last but not least, the difference in the content and scope of associated meanings carried by the names in the source-language and in the target-language, respectively, has to be highlighted, to see whether it may distort individuals’ perception and identification of the name bearer.

References

- Ballard, M. 2011. *Numele proprii în traducere* [Proper names in translation]. Trans. coord. G. Lungu-Badea. Timișoara: Editura Universității de Vest.
- Bugheșiu, A. 2011. Shop Names as Cultural Mediators. *The Journal of Linguistic and Intercultural Education – JoLIE* 4: 37–50.
- Bugheșiu, A. 2020. Film Names as Objects of Translation. In *Translation and Interpretation in the Age of Globalization*, L. Tomoiagă and R. Demarcsek (eds.), 121–137. Beau Bassin: LAP Lambert Academic Publishing.
- Cinemagia*. (n.d.). <https://www.cinemagia.ro/> (accessed in August 2022).
- Coates, R. 2006. Some Consequences and Critiques of the Pragmatic Theory of Properhood. *Onoma* 41: 27–44.
- Corbu, N. 2009. *Brandurile globale. O cercetare cros-culturală* [Global brands. A cross-cultural research]. Bucharest: Tritonic.
- Díaz-Pérez, F.J. 2014. Relevance Theory and Translation: Translating Puns in Spanish Film Titles into English. *Journal of Pragmatics* 70: 108–129.
- Ding, A. 2016. A Study of Film Title Translation from the Perspective of Peter Newmark’s Communicative Translation Theory. *Studies in Literature and Language* 13(3): 32–37.

- Ermolenko, A.Y., L. Radikovna Sakaeva and A. Rafailovna Baranova. 2020. Strategies and Difficulties of Translating American Film Headlines in Russian. *Journal of Research in Applied Linguistics*, 11, special issue, *Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Applied Linguistics Issues (ALI 2020)*, Saint Petersburg, 13–14 June 2020: 286–291.
- Felecan, D. 2014. Prolegomena to a Different Kind of Naming: Name-Giving between the Conventional and Unconventional. In *Unconventional Anthroponyms: Formation Patterns and Discursive Function*, O. Felecan and D. Felecan (eds.), 15–25. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Gallois, C., T. Ogay and H. Giles. 2005. Communication Accommodation Theory: A Look Back and A Look Ahead. In *Theorizing about Intercultural Communication*, W.B. Gudykunst (ed.), 121–148. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Genette, G. 1997. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gudeleva, E. and E. Sudarkina. 2017. Conceptual Sphere of Modern Cinema (A Study of Headline Complexes of 21st-century European and Asian Movies). In *Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on Onomastics "Name and Naming": Sacred and Profane in Onomastics*, O. Felecan (ed.), 806–822. Cluj-Napoca: Mega, Argonaut.
- IMDb: *The Internet Movie Database*. (n.d.). https://www.imdb.com/?ref_=nv_home (accessed in August 2022).
- Krasina, E.A. and A. Moctar. 2020. On Film Titles: Translation or Retitling? *Bulletin of Moscow Region State University* 2. www.evestnik-mgou.ru (accessed in August 2022).
- Lehrer, A. 2006. Proper Names. In *Concise Encyclopedia of Semantics*, K. Allan (ed.), 758–761. Kidlington: Elsevier.
- Lu, Y. 2009. On the Translation of English Movie Titles. *Asian Social Science* 5(3): 171–173.
- Lungu-Badea, G. 2013. Translation of Literary Proper Names. In *Onomastics in Contemporary Public Space*, O. Felecan and A. Bugheșiu (eds.), 443–457. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Lungu-Badea, G. 2017. Note cu privire la traducerea numelor proprii literare [Notes on the translation of literary proper names]. In *Studii de traductologie românească. I. Discurs traductiv, discurs metatraductiv*, G. Lungu-Badea and N. Obrocea (eds.), 251–266. Timișoara: Editura Universit[ății de Vest.
- Martí, R. and M. Zapater. 1993. Translation of Titles of Films: A Critical Approach. *Sintagma* 5: 81–87.
- Negro Alousque, I. 2015. The Role of Cognitive Operations in the Translation of Film Titles. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences* 212: 237–241.
- Nord, C. 1993. *Einführung in das funktionale Übersetzen: Am Beispiel von Titeln und Überschriften*. Tübingen: Francke.
- Oltean, Ș. 2013a. On the Semantics of Fictional Names. *Revue roumaine de linguistique* LVIII(4): 371–382. <http://www.lingv.ro/images/RRL%204%202013%20art03Oltean.pdf> (accessed in August 2022).
- Oltean, Ș. 2013b. On the Semantics of Proper Names. In *Onomastics in Contemporary Public Space*, O. Felecan and A. Bugheșiu (eds.), 50–65. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Peña-Cervel, S. 2016. Motivating Film Title Translation: A Cognitive Analysis. *Círculo de Lingüística Aplicada a la Comunicación (clac)* 66: 301–339.

- Pinsker, B. 2004. The Road to Dogville. *Wired*, January 3. <https://www.wired.com/2004/03/the-road-to-dogville/> (accessed in August 2022).
- Ross, J. 2013. 'No Revolutionary Roads Please, We're Turkish': The Translation of Film Titles as an Object of Translation Research. *Across Languages and Cultures* 14(2): 245–266.
- Santaemilia-Ruiz, J. and B. Soler-Pardo. 2014. Translating Film Titles. Quentin Tarantino, on Difference and Globalisation. *Babel* 60: 193–215.
- Sjöblom, P. 2013. *Lumia* by Nokia, *iPhone* by Apple: Global or Local Features in Commercial Names? In *Names in the Economy: Cultural Prospects*, P. Sjöblom, T. Ainiala and U. Hakala (eds.), 2–14. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Sklari, R. 2004. Review: *Dogville* by Gilliam Berrie, Bettina Brokemper, Anja Grafers, Els Vandevorst, Lars von Trier. *Cinéaste* 29(3): 47–49.
- Smith, G.W. 2006. A Semiotic Theory of Names. *Onoma* 41: 15–26.
- Soames, S. 2002. *Beyond Rigidity: The Unfinished Semantic Agenda of "Naming and Necessity."* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Surdyk, A. and A. Urban. 2016. Mistranslations of Film Titles: Between Fidelity and Advertising. *Glottodidactica* XLIII(1): 161–178.
- Van Langendonck, W. 2007. *Theory and Typology of Proper Names*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Yu, R. 2018. A Preliminary Study of English Movie Title Translation. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 8(12): 1658–1663.