

PhD Thesis Abstract

A Study on English-Korean Translation of Tabooed Slang and Vulgarism: Focusing on Shifts in Lexical Formality

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1. Background and Objectives

This PhD research compares and analyzes the transition of tabooed slang and vulgar expressions in translated novels and DVD subtitles in terms of shifts in lexical formality, aiming at identifying both linguistic and extra-linguistic factors that affect such formality shifts. Tabooed slang and vulgarism, which are the focus of this study, are defined as “slang and vulgar expressions universally regarded as taboo”. The reason this study pays attention to formality shifts in these terms lies in the recognition that there is a close relation between formality and the emotional tone of words or expressions (Newmark 1988, 13; 김동연 2009, 9-10). This means that formality shifts are more likely to lead to failures in preserving the emotional intensity of the source text in translation.

Tabooed slang and vulgarism arouse unpleasant feelings in the hearer (Jay 1992; Dewaele 2004; Janschewitz 2008; Jay & Janschewitz 2008), and they tend to lower the formality levels of speech. Such languages function as literary devices that highlight characters in novels and movies or in certain genres, make up the author’s writing style. Tabooed slang and vulgar words also carry the meta-linguistic function of conveying the author’s intended message. Therefore, in order to achieve the intended stylistic effect and pragmatic function, the emotional force that these words contain should be reproduced as closely as possible to the original in translation.

However, such terms are likely to pose challenges in translating because of

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inherent features that make them hard to translate. These features include: perceptual differences in the emotional force of tabooed words between the 'L1' (mother tongue) and 'L2' (later acquired language) (Jay 1992; Harris, Aycicegi & Gleason 2003; Dewaele 2004; Janschewitz 2008; Jay & Janschewitz 2008); differences in reception between cultures and languages; and differences in lexical segmentation, which varies from language to language and from culture to culture due to differences in the emphasis placed on concepts and values in a given language or culture. Because of these inherent characteristics, translators tend to face difficulty in meeting the expected standards of readers in the target culture. Accordingly, translators often have to choose between whether to be faithful to the original and its author, or whether to preserve as closely as possible the emotional intensity of the original in the translated text, which in turn would make the reader (or the audience) unpleasant.

This PhD research pursues the following objectives: 1) Drawing on empirical data, this study seeks to examine problems that may occur when tabooed words are toned down in emotional force or omitted regardless of their textural functions; 2) Based on the analytical outcomes of empirical data, this research will suggest a desirable way of translating tabooed slang and vulgar expressions; 3) In addition, this research also aims to identify factors that affect translators' choices in translating such words.

2. Research Questions and Methods

This PhD research sought to answer the following four research questions: 1) Do shifts in lexical formality occur between original novels and subtitles, and their translated counterparts?; 2) Are there any differences in formality shifts between translated novels and subtitles?; 3) What impact does the discordance of lexical formality between the ST and the TT have on the text?; 4) What extra-linguistic factors affect formality shifts in the translation of novels and subtitles?

Through the analysis of extracts from novels and DVD films comprising the corpus used in this research, this dissertation examines translations of tabooed slang and vulgarisms in terms of formality shifts in translated novels and film subtitles; differences in formality shifts between novel and film translations; and the impact of discrepancy in the formality levels between ST and TT on the text as a whole or on its immediate context. In order to analyze

formality shifts, a model¹ composed of five scales of lexical formality in both English and Korean was formulated. By applying the lexical formality scales to these collected language pairs, three types of formality shifts were identified: "elevated," "preserved," and "lowered."

Following the text analysis, a survey was conducted in order to identify extra-linguistic factors affecting formality shifts in novel translation and subtitles. Thirty professional translators—experienced novel translators and film subtitle translators—were asked to answer a questionnaire consisting of 27 questions.

3. Research Findings

3.1. Lexical Formality Comparison

An analysis of 707 ST/TT pairs from thirty copies of novels showed that the predominant pattern in translating tabooed slang and vulgar expression was the 'preserved' type, where tabooed slang and vulgar words are translated into words with the same level of lexical formality in the target language, thus preserving the emotional force contained in the original expressions. On the other hand, an analysis of the 1,547 ST/TT pairs from thirty copies of DVD subtitles showed that the most frequently occurring pattern of formality shift was the "elevated" type, where the expressions in the original are replaced with toned-down words of higher formality in the translation.

This research examined formality shifts in terms of the type of tabooed slang and vulgar expression. The results indicate that in both novels and film subtitles, words associated with sex showed the highest ratio of the "elevated" formality shift, followed by expressions related to body parts and excretion, while swear words showed the lowest ratio of formality shift in both types of translation.

Inherently offensive, tabooed slang and vulgar expressions are characterized by the triggering of self-censorship in the speaker (Allan & Burridge 2007,

¹ The model is formulated based on suggestions by Newmark (1988), 클레어(1995), 김동연(2009), and 김태엽(2007). The model is composed of five levels of formality: formal, general use, euphemism, slang, and taboo words or expressions (the degree of formality lowers as each word goes to the right.).

24). Hence, when examining the translational features of these expressions in view of formality shifts, this study considers genre and the translator's gender as factors that could result in self-censorship in the translation of subtitles and novels, respectively. It was found that female translators showed a greater tendency, compared to their male counterparts, to match the degree of lexical formality of the original in their novel translations, thus preserving similar emotional force.

In subtitling, translation tendencies varied depending on the film genre. Drama was the genre that showed the most distinctive tendency to translate violent and obnoxious expressions into those with less emotional force and higher lexical formality, or the "elevated" type of formality shift, followed by comedy, and violence and crime. On the other hand, the highest ratio of the "preserved" type, designed to reproduce similar stylistic and pragmatic effects in the TT, was found in violence and crime, followed by comedy and drama, which is the exact reverse order to the "elevated" type.

Next, differences in formality shifts between translated novels and subtitles were examined. The results showed that the "preserved" type was found to be the predominant pattern of formality shift in translated novels, whereas the "elevated" type, in which tabooed slang and vulgar words are replaced with expressions of a higher level of formality with neutralized emotional force or are deleted completely, was predominant in subtitle translations.

The researcher also analyzed which methods were employed to lower the emotional intensity of tabooed slang and vulgar expressions in the ST in the translation of novels and subtitles and classified them into-replacement, omission, reduction, and semantic modification. Differences were found between the two different types of translations. Replacement was the most frequently used method in translating novels, whereas omission was most common in translating subtitles.

96.3% of the 'elevated' type of formality shifts in translated novels, and 95.3% in subtitles were translation into expressions of much higher formality than those in the original. It is understandable for translators to tone down emotional intensity of such expressions to meet the expected standards of readers in the target culture. However, a real problem lies in the fact that tabooed slang and vulgar expressions tend to be used as a linguistic device to highlight genre features in violence and crime, or to trigger laughter in comedy. Therefore, either alterations to emotional force and formality or complete omission implies that a similar effect on the ST cannot be achieved in the

translated work, thus posing difficulties for TT readers in understanding the story, characters, and contexts.

3.2. Extra-linguistic Factors Affecting Translators' Choices

In order to identify extra-linguistic factors that influence shifts in lexical formality in translated novels and subtitles, a survey of thirty professional translators was conducted. The survey revealed remarkable differences in attitude between novel translators and subtitle translators in regard to attenuating levels of intensity in tabooed slang and vulgar expressions. Novel translators were strongly against toning down the intensity of words, whereas the majority of subtitle translators were in favor of the idea. These results correspond with the results of the corpus analysis, which show that the "elevated" type is more dominant in subtitles than in translated novels.

The result indicates that translators have differences in the perception of offensiveness expressed in their L1 and in L2. The "elevated" type of formality shift is most frequently found in the order of expressions with sexual references, body parts and excretion, and swear words, which also coincides with the results of the corpus analysis in this study. Among the three types of tabooed words, swear words show the highest ratio of replacement with words of a similar degree of emotional force.

It seems that certain rules governing translators' choices for such sensitive expressions lead to differences in formality shifts between translations of novel and DVD subtitles. According to the survey, subtitle translators are more likely to be influenced by institutional censorship than novel translators. Aware of the existence of institutional censorship, they are also more likely than novel translators to carry out preemptive self-censorship and thereby lower the emotional intensity of certain expressions that seem to go against the general expectations of audiences or are inappropriate for media or publishing in the target culture.

4. Conclusion

This PhD research formulated a model composed of five levels of lexical formality as an objective tool to analyze formality shifts between ST-TT

language pairs. The outcomes of the analysis suggest that tabooed slang and vulgarisms in the source language should be translated into words with the same degree of formality in the target language, which would be a desirable way of translating such expressions. Moreover, the findings of the survey indicate that extra-linguistic factors greatly affect translators' choices in translating these expressions. This PhD research started in the hope that, by achieving the aforementioned objectives, it will contribute to broadening our insight into the translation of slang and vulgar expressions, which have been regarded as a minor language variety and thus neglected by the social and academic communities as a whole.

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