GRAMMATICAL COMPRESSION IN FILM TRANSLATION

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Nowadays translators employ various translation strategies in order to produce an adequate translation and further establish international communication. This paper deals with one translation strategy called **compression** which involves leaving out the target text elements present in the source text to retain the content of the words rather than preserve the structural adequacy of the text format. The degree of compression is constantly increasing in contemporary translations, due to an intensive lifestyle, the necessity to convey informational content as quickly as possible arises. Compression is widely employed in subtitling because of both the requirement to provide a very short target text by employing a restricted number of symbols allowed per one subtitle, and the necessity to express only the main idea of the utterances. Taking linguistic aspects into account, the translation strategy comprises of either grammatical or lexical ways to shorten the text without destroying its meaning. This paper presents the grammatical means of compression observed in film subtitling by shifting the primary focus on grammatical alternations found in different film genres.

INTRODUCTION

Translation has always occupied an important position in the development of world culture. In order to produce an adequate translation, the translator is obliged to employ various translation strategies. This article introduces **compression** as a certain type of text transformation that appears when translating from English to Lithuanian. According to Olimpija Armalytė: 'compression as a technique is very common in the practice of translation and is understood as a whole system of techniques enabling to shorten the text without destroying its meaning' (Armalytė 1982, 25). This translation strategy is of interest not only because it reveals the potential of the target language, but also the competence and creativity of the translator. Compression is widely employed in film subtitles, where concise and adequate phrasing is especially important. The aim of the article is to examine the linguistic peculiarities of the English and Lithuanian languages in the translation of subtitles. The object of the paper is a range of subtitles selected

from two films of different genres; namely from the documentary film *Zeitgeist* and the science fiction film *Avatar*. This film genre disparity puts forward the idea that the science fiction film ought to contain more cases of compression because the language style is informal and, therefore, it should include more irrelevant linguistic elements such as interjections, cases of reduplication, derivational affixes of word classes, and so on, than the documentary genre. In the first part of the article the main theoretical assumptions concerning the notion of compression, subtitling, key aspects and their contribution to the sufficient translation of the subtitles are presented. The second part of the paper deals with the practical findings of the case study of compression in film subtitles by presenting the methodological issues of the case study, as well as introducing the linguistic insights of the practical study and illustrating them by means of characteristic examples taken from the analysed films.

THE NOTION OF COMPRESSION

According to Nigel Armstrong, compression involves leaving out the target text (TT) elements present in the source text (ST). It generally occurs when the segment contains an unnecessary detail that might weary the reader, or information that is difficult to translate concisely because of culture-specific obstacles, or both (Armstrong 2005, 159). Compression is also common in subtitle translation[1], because of the strict requirements of using a limited amount of symbols in one subtitle position (including the gaps). The following specification is employed since the main quality of subtitles to strive for is considered to be briefness in order for the viewer of the film (or a programme) to be able to read the text in the subtitles quickly and naturally. As Paul Cogen, a professional subtitler, remarks, it is essential that the subtitles respect a number of parameters, the key ones being time and space, since 'it takes the eye a certain amount of time for a viewer to realise that a new text has appeared on the screen and to start reading... Consequently, the viewer would not be distracted from watching the events on the screen' (Cogen 2009). In order to produce a sufficient translation then, a translator faces the necessity of making certain alternations to the text by means of various techniques: to condense the content into shorter phrases (almost re-translation) with as few words as possible; to convey the idea of what is being said while allowing the audience as much time as possible to watch the action onscreen; not to translate literally, capture the essence and filter out what is non-essential; to maintain the right register; to adapt, replace and recreate TT; to divide lines with speed of reading and comprehension in mind; to keep idea units and semantic units together, etc. (*ibid.*)

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[1]   Fotios Karamitroglou states that subtitling requires the 'translation of the spoken (or written) ST of an audiovisual product into a written TT which is added onto the images of the original product, usually at the bottom of the screen' (Karamitroglou 2000, 5) to achieve a brief and accurate content of the ST.

GRAMMATICAL CASES OF COMPRESSION

The variety of techniques employed to create compression in subtitling comprises of both lexical and grammatical means. The paper examines practical cases of grammatical (both morphological and syntactical) means which were found in the subtitles of the selected films, namely, omission, substitution, syntactical transformation, reduction, etc.

In order to examine which genre contains a higher degree of grammatical compression, four pages of subtitles have been selected for the practical analysis. A total of 102 subtitles containing compression have been identified, 68 of them being from the science fiction film *Avatar* and 34 from the documentary film *Zeitgeist*. Instances of translation are considered to contain compression when the TT is shortened intentionally, even though a word-for-word or a very close-to-original translation is possible and no significant alternations are obligatory.

As some subtitles contained more than one case of compression, the numbers provided in the analysis reflect the amount of instances of compression, not the amount of subtitles.
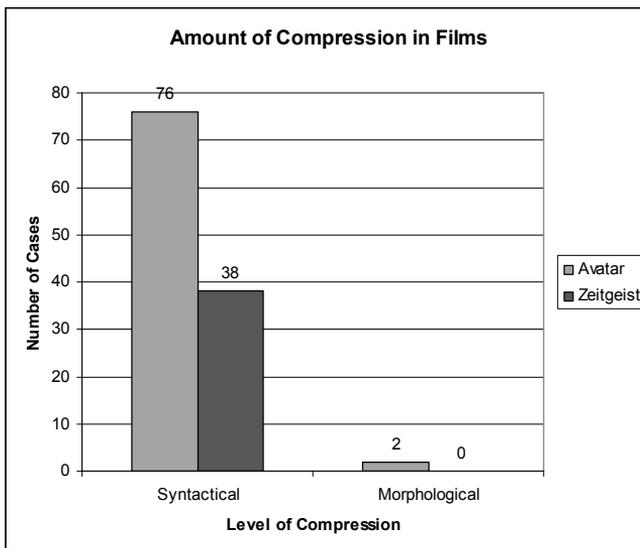

Figure 1. Amount of compression in different film-genres

Statistically, the science fiction film *Avatar* appeared to contain a considerably larger number of compression on grammatical levels comparing with the documentary film *Zeitgeist*: 78 cases appeared in *Avatar* and only 38 syntactical cases were detected in *Zeitgeist*.

The most frequent grammatical means of compression employed in subtitling was the

omission of one or more word classes in the sentence to achieve the effect of briefness[2]. The disparities of the film genres govern the different omitted segments, as well as other distinct syntactic means used in order to compress the target language. Typically, conjunctions, pronouns, adverbs, numerals, some prepositions and prepositional phrases and even particular nouns and noun phrases were omitted.

The most common occurrence of compression related to the omission of conjunctions (8 incidences in the documentary film *Zeitgeist* and 6 times in the science fiction film *Avatar*). In some cases, such as **(2)**, the omitted conjunction comprises of more symbols in the Lithuanian language, and subsequently by following the quantitative requirements of subtitling, it has been eliminated. The examples below illustrate the fact:

(1) (...) ...<u>and unless</u> and until you are prepared to look at the whole truth... (...)
Ir kol nebūsite pasiruošę pažvelgti į visą tiesą, (...)

(*Zeitgeist*)

(2) There's no such thing <u>as</u> an ex-Marine.
Nėra tokios sąvokos _ „buvęs" jūrų pėstininkas.

(*Avatar*)

Because of the different typological characteristics of the two languages, pronoun omission has also been rather frequent (11 times in *Avatar* and 5 in *Zeitgeist*). Prototypically, both lexical and grammatical elements that are used commonly tend to be reduced representing the so-called pro-drop phenomenon. In many languages that have grammatical agreement between the subject and the verb, a pronominal subject can be left unexpressed because the information about the subject may be found on the verb (Haiman, Munro 1983, Whaley 1997). This universal tendency can be accounted for by appealing to language economy. Since in Lithuanian the inflection of the predicate indicates the marked person and number, and sentential word order allows the absence of subject without destroying the grammatical structure of the sentence, the omission of personal pronouns has been found to be common in the film subtitles.

(3) They can fix a spinal, if <u>you</u> got the money, (...)
Jie gali sutaisyti stuburą, jei <u>turi</u> pinigų.

(*Avatar*)

(4) <u>You</u>'ve got to obey the rules.
<u>Privalote</u> laikytis taisyklių.

(*Avatar*)

Similarly, the grammatical characteristics of the Lithuanian syntactical constructions

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allows omitting the copular verb as a non-relevant link between the subject and predicative element, for instance:

(5) This <u>is</u> the sun.
Tai – saulė.

<div align="right">(Zeitgeist)</div>

(6) <u>And</u> the concept <u>is that</u> every driver is matched to his own avatar, (...)
Idėja tokia: kiekvienas valdytojas turi būti panašus į savo avatarą, (...)

<div align="right">(Avatar)</div>

A large part of omission is closely related with the grammatical modification. Accordingly, some types of syntactic constructions, in which the syntactic head of the construction is accompanied by an element not grammatically required by it, are compressed. Traditionally, modifiers of the syntactic constructions are demonstrative pronouns, attributive adjectives, nouns, numerals, etc. Omission typically occurs with non-restrictive modifiers because they are not required for the notional identification. Among the words signifying additional properties of the nominal referent, and therefore being omitted from the film subtitles, demonstrative pronouns, numerals and attributive nominals have been identified. There demonstrative pronouns like *that*, *these* are eliminated since they have not made any meaningful changes in the target expressions:

(7) Remember, people, <u>you</u> lose <u>that</u> mask, (...)
Atminkite, žmonės, pamesite kaukę, (...)

<div align="right">(Avatar)</div>

Other word classes functioning as modifiers have also been omitted. For instance, noun and noun phrase omission has been recognised 7 times in *Avatar* and 5 times in *Zeitgeist*; numerals have been omitted twice in *Zeitgeist* (as in **(8)** and **(9)**) and once in *Avatar*.

(8) And the invisible man has a special list of <u>ten</u> things he does not want you to do. (...)
Ir šis nematomas žmogus turi specialų sąrašą dalykų, kurių jis norėtų, kad jūs nedarytumėte. (...)

<div align="right">(Zeitgeist)</div>

(9) And if you do any of these <u>ten</u> things, he has a special place, full of fire... (...).
O jei padarysite nors vieną šių dalykų, tuomet jis turi jums specialią vietą, pilną liepsnų (...).

<div align="right">(Zeitgeist)</div>

In rare cases restrictive modifiers which are responsible for identification have been omitted. Prepositions and / or prepositional phrases in **(10)**, **(11)** and the noun phrase in **(12)** have been omitted:

> **(10)** ...<u>into</u> the bio-lab.
>   *Biolaboratorija.*
>
>   (*Avatar*)
>
> **(11)** <u>Back</u> on Earth these guys were Army dogs, Marines, (...).
>   *Žemėje šie žmonės buvo paprasti kareiviai, jūrų pėstininkai, (...).*
>
>   (*Avatar*)
>
> **(12)** (...) with a big hole blown through the <u>middle</u> of my life, (...)
>   (...) *su didele skyle, žiojinčia mano gyvenime, (...)*
>
>   (*Avatar*)

Adverb and adverbial phrase omission has occurred 9 times in *Avatar* and twice in *Zeitgeist*. The following examples illustrate the events:

> **(13)** Religion has <u>actually</u> convinced people that there's an invisible man living
>   in the sk*y...*
>
>   *Religija įtikino žmones, kad danguje gyvena nematomas žmogus, (...)*
>
>   (*Zeitgeist*)
>
> **(14)** In cryo, you don't dream <u>at all.</u>
>   *Krio būsenoje nesapnuojama.*
>
>   (*Avatar*)

Despite the facts mentioned above, the omission is also potentially possible with adverbs and adverbial phrases since semantically this word class covers an extremely wide range of concepts. 'For this reason they cannot be identified in terms of individuation and therefore, function on the clause or discourse level, i.e. their semantic effect or scope is relevant to entire clause' (Payne 2006, 117). Thus, the omission of adverbs and adverbial phrases helps to make a TT brief without the distortion of meaning. The data shows that not only evidential adverbs, which indicate the source of the information expressed in the clause, for instance *apparently*, *undoubtedly*, *obviously*, *actually* (Payne 2006, 118; see **(13)**), but also epistemic adverbs, so-called hedgings have been omitted in the film subtitles, since their function is to indicate 'the degree to which a speaker is committed to the truth of the clause' (*ibid.*). The situation about the speaker's emotional state, beliefs or even reasoning is grasped from the situation on the screen and needs no additional lexical means to be coded.

Similarly, both omitted interjections and forms of address have not aggravated the rendering of the meaning. Their emotional content may be perfectly discovered and understood by the viewer of the film. Some examples with interjections are given below:

> **(15)** <u>Wow!</u> You look just like him.
>   *Koks tu panašus į jį.*
>
>   (*Avatar*)

(16) <u>Oh, man</u>, that is just wrong.
Tai taip neteisinga.

<div align="right">(<i>Avatar</i>)</div>

(17) (…) but <u>you guys</u> can take them out tomorrow.
(…) *bet rytoj galėsite juos išimti.*

<div align="right">(<i>Avatar</i>)</div>

Exceptions include forenames, surnames and honorific forms which avoid compression because of the referentially marked content which cannot be omitted.

(18) (...) – Dr. Max Patel. Great to meet you. – Good to meet you. Yeath.
(...) – *Dr. Maksas Peitelis. Malonu. – Ir man.*

<div align="right">(<i>Avatar</i>)</div>

There are also instances with subtitles containing 'multiple omission', i.e. when more than one sentential element is omitted (like in **(18)**, **(19)**, and **(20)**). Although the translator eliminates a considerable amount of the segment the essence of the utterance remains unaltered:

(19) (...) ... <u>and</u> wherever <u>it may go, whoever</u> it may lead <u>to</u>... (...).
(...) *kad ir kur ji bevestų, (...).*

<div align="right">(<i>Zeitgeist</i>)</div>

(20) – Welcome to Pandora. <u>Good to have you</u> – Thanks.
– *Sveiki atvykę į Pandorą. – Ačiū.*

<div align="right">(<i>Avatar</i>)</div>

Hence, as the undertaken analysis of the film subtitles shows, it is possible to arrive at the generalisation that the amount of omission of word classes is much larger in the science fiction film than it is in the documentary film. Therefore, this finding promotes the idea that the science fiction film contains more redundant information within the sentence and may eliminate not only sentential segments, but also a whole sentence which is considered irrelevant. Some additional examples may illustrate the fact:

(21) What makes you think <u>for one minute</u> that the religious institution… (…).
Kodėl turėtume manyti, kad religinė institucija (...).

<div align="right">(<i>Zeitgeist</i>)</div>

(22) (...) ... There's nothing like an old-school safety brief.
(...) *Senamadiškas taisyklių kalimas.*

<div align="right">(<i>Avatar</i>)</div>

As was mentioned above, compression via omission constitutes the majority of different compression cases on the grammatical level; consequently, the statistical view of omission in subtitling may be represented in the following diagram:
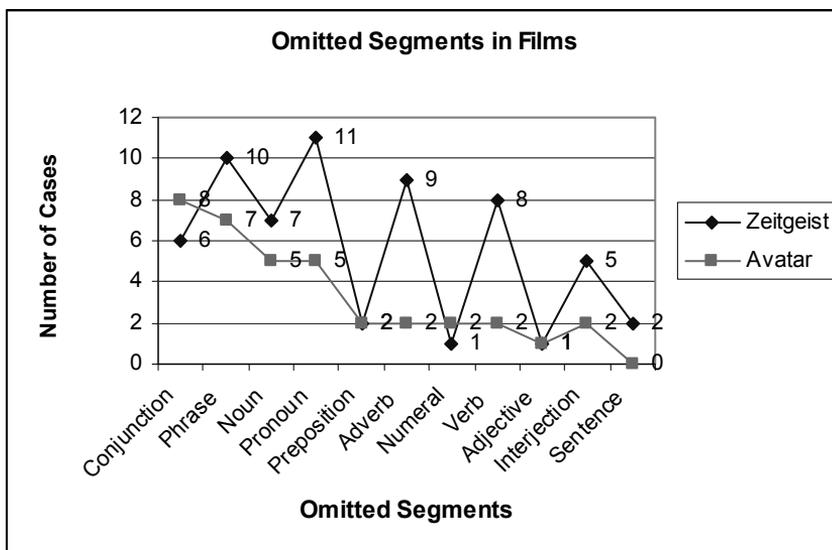
Figure 2. Amount of omitted segments in different film-genres

In addition to omission, other syntactical means of compression such as substitution of grammatical categories, reduction of (truncated) sentences, as well as syntactical transformation have been recognised in the film subtitles.

Substitution may be regarded as a particular linguistic shift of one grammatical unit or sequence of them by another unit within the same grammatical category. The undertaken analysis shows that compression in the film subtitles have often been associated with the substitution of the grammatical categories of voice and tense. Firstly, the syntactical constructions with the passive voice in English tend to be transformed into the corresponding construction with the active voice in Lithuanian and *vice versa*. This categorical shift is most probably determined by the limited number of used symbols per slide, on the one hand. However, on the other hand, the situation described by the passive construction does not radically differ from the situation reflected by the active construction—the nature of the process is preserved intact, the participants in the situation remain in their unchanged quality. As a matter of fact, with the transition from the active voice to the passive voice, the subjective appraisal of the situation is depicted by the speaker and the plane of his presentation of it. Consequently, compression via transformation of the voice constructions is rather noteworthy. Some examples below illustrate the kind of substitution:

(23) His birth <u>was accompanied</u> by a star in the east… (…).
Jo gimimą <u>palydėjo</u> rytinė žvaigždė, (…).

(*Zeitgeist*)

(24) (…) <u>A guy</u> with the knife <u>took</u> all Tommy would ever be… (…).
Tomis buvo nužudytas ginkluoto tipo… (…).

(*Avatar*)

In some instances substitution is associated with the values of the grammatical category of tense. In film subtitles because briefness is required the present tense is used instead of the future tense **(25)** and the present tense is shifted into the past tense **(29)**. This means that the future form of the verb only shows that the denoted process is prospected as a present-oriented action and the present event may be seen from the past perspective.

(25) (...) <u>that'll stop your heart in one minute.</u>
(...) *nuo kurių per minutę sustoja širdis.*

(*Avatar*)

Additionally, to achieve the effect of compression the personal sentences have been transformed into impersonal constructions because of different perspectivization:

(26) <u>You have to</u> know the truth and seek the truth and the truth will set you free.

<u>Reikia</u> žinoti tiesą ir ieškoti tiesos ir tiesa tave išlaisvins.

(*Zeitgeist*)

(27) (...) Yeath, we're gonna take this nice and easy, Jake.
(...) *Tik palengva, Džekai.*

(*Avatar*)

Syntactical transformations have been related to the expanded sentential constructions, where, for example, the subordinate time clause with the Wh-phrase in English has been transformed into a simple sentence with the participial modifier in Lithuanian **(28)**, infinitival phrases have been simplified and changed into simple personal constructions **(29)** and **(30)**:

(28) <u>When that ramp comes down</u>, go directly into the base. Do not stop!

<u>Nusileidus rampai</u>, einat tiesiai į bazę. Nesustokite!

(*Avatar*)

(29) So the proprioceptive sims <u>seem to work</u> really well.
Orientacijos vietoje ir erdvėje simuliatoriai suveikė puikiai.

(*Avatar*)

Some subtitles contain instances of **reduced sentences** in the target text. Words and phrases, which have been repeatedly used, have been syntactically shortened either by excluding them **(30)**, reducing the amount of the intentional repetition of a word or phrase **(31)**, **(32)** or by transforming the whole utterance syntactically **(33)**. Some illustrations are given below:

(30) <u>Go, go, go, go!</u> Get out of there! Keep moving! <u>Let's go, let's go!</u>
<u>Einam, einam, einam!</u> Lauk iš čia! Greičiau! Eikite tiesiai! Nesustokite!

(*Avatar*)

(31) <u>Well, well</u>, ladies.

> *Na*, panelės.
>
> (*Avatar*)
>
> **(32)** We're there.
> *Jau*.
>
> (*Avatar*)
>
> **(33)** You will be hungry. <u>You will be</u> weak.
> *Jūs jausitės išalkę, silpni.*
>
> (*Avatar*)

Taking morphological techniques of compression into account, two instances have been observed in the case study. Firstly, words, especially measure terms, have been abbreviated **(34)** and, secondly, the phrase that indicates functions of the person has been substituted by a single word defining the profession the person has been applied to **(35)**:

> **(34)** (...) you're unconscious in 20 <u>seconds</u>, you're dead in four <u>minutes</u>!
> (...) *po 20 <u>s.</u> neteksite sąmonės, po 4 <u>min.</u> mirsite.*
>
> (*Avatar*)
>
> **(35)** (...) you're <u>doing science</u>...
> (...) *jūs – <u>mokslininkas</u>...*
>
> (*Avatar*)

Thus, the foregoing linguistic facts could suggest that the substitution of the voice category is more common in the documentary film while the alternation of other grammatical categories such as tense and various transformation of the sentence have been used in the science fiction film.

CONCLUSION

Given these facts, compression as a certain translation technique to shorten the TT without destroying its meaning is widely used in film subtitling due to both the quantitative requirements of subtitling and the qualitative aspects of the effective translation of the film to capture the essence of what is being said by filtering out anything which is non-essential.

In the English / Lithuanian subtitles translation of the different genres of two films the compression on the syntactical level comprises of omission, transformation of sentential segments from personal to impersonal, substitution of values of different grammatical categories, reduction of the sentential structure, alternation from simple sentences to complex ones and a loss of redundant words.

The analysis of the linguistic data signals that the science fiction film *Avatar* contains far more cases of compression of different grammatical aspects since the language style of this film is informal and it contains a considerable amount of redundant utterances that may be omitted or substituted. Meanwhile, the language style of the documentary film is formal and the possibility of creating a higher degree of compression is limited

by the importance of every informational unit provided in the utterances of this film, thereby leading to the inapplicability of substitution or elimination.

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GRAMATINĖ KOMPRESIJA FILMŲ VERTIMUOSE

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Santrauka

Siekdami adekvačiai išversti tekstą, išsamiai perteikti teksto originalo kalba informaciją ir išsaugoti jo sąsajas su tarptautiniu kultūriniu kontekstu, subtitrų vertėjai dažnai naudoja kompresijos strategijas, kad minimaliomis kalbinėmis priemonėmis galėtų maksimaliai perteikti teksto originalo kalba turinį. Dėl ribotos titrų apimties ir glaustos kalbinės raiškos, kai vertėjas turi perteikti žiūrovui tik esminius originalo minties aspektus, kompresija tampa nepakeičiama subtitrų vertimo strategija tiek gramatiniame, tiek leksiniame kalbos lygmenyje. Šiame straipsnyje pristatoma kompresija kaip viena iš šiuolaikinio vertimo strategijų, apimanti tam tikrų teksto originalo kalba elementų trumpinimą neprarandant ir neiškreipiant teksto originalo kalba esmės. Atliktoje praktinėje subtitrų analizėje apsiribojama tik gramatiniu lygmeniu: analizuojami dviejų skirtingų žanrų filmų (dokumentinio *Laiko dvasia* (*Zeitgeist*) ir meninio *Avataras* (*Avatar*)) angliški ir lietuviški subtitrai ir atliekama lietuviškuose subtitruose pasitaikiusių kompresijos atvejų analizė.

Tyrimo rezultatai rodo, kad meninio žanro filmų subtitruose gramatinė kompresija taikoma dažniau nei mokslinio žanro filmuose. Tai leidžia daryti prielaidą, kad meninio filmo subtitruose pasitaiko nemažai perteklinės informacijos, kurią vertime galima nenuostolingai pakeisti, sutrumpinti arba jos atsisakyti, o mokslinio stiliaus filmuose pateikiami svarbūs informaciniai turinio blokai, kurių modifikacija arba atsisakymas vertime gali iškreipti teksto originalo kalba turinio esmę.