What an echo!

A contrastive and parallel study of English, French and Dutch exclamatives using OpenSubtitles 2018 data

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Exclamative constructions have been subject to much study, across a multitude of languages, both from a monolingual and crosslinguistic perspective. The translation of exclamatives, however, has received much less attention despite translated texts holding much valuable information about the meaning of a source linguistic form (cf. Noël 2003, De Baets et al. 2020). This study aims to contribute to remedying this through a corpus study of English, French and Dutch exclamatives and their translations in subtitles.

Using SketchEngine (Kilgariff et al. 2014), random samples of 100 instances of two core exclamative constructions were extracted from the English, French and Dutch subcorpora of OpenSubtitles 2018 (Lison & Tiedemann 2016), together with their corresponding translations into the other two languages in question. In English there is a large consensus that prototypical realisations of the exclamative are *what a* and *how* + adjective constructions, as in examples (1) and (2) respectively. For Dutch and French, data sets of the corresponding exclamatives (*wh* word+noun/adjective) and their translations were extracted: for French 100 *quel* and 100 *comme* exclamatives, as in (3) and (4), and for Dutch 100 *wat (een)* exclamatives and the 17 *hoe* exclamatives available in the corpus, illustrated in (5) and (6) respectively. Analysis of the data focuses on the syntax and semantico-pragmatics of the exclamatives in the three languages. Attention is given to the syntactic realisation of the exclamatives – verbless, as in (1), (3) and (5); full, as in (2) and (6); or embedded, as in (4). Additional parameters analysed the element modified – both in terms of word category, lexical item and its polarity – , the presence (or absence) of performative elements (Krawczak & Glynn 2015), and, of course, the chosen translation.

This extensive study allows for cross-linguistic comparison of 600 English, French and Dutch exclamatives, and aims to show if any attenuation or strengthening is language-specific or a result of the translation and/or subtitling process. If "[s]ubtitlers tend to keep in their translations the words that are very similar in both languages and to follow, as far as possible, the syntactic structure of the source text", then, given the availability of highly similar exclamative constructions in all three languages, any reduction, omission, or change, can potentially be accounted for in terms of cultural or societal norms (Diaz-Cintas, 2012).

Preliminary analysis of the comparative data widely supports observations made in monolingual studies of the three languages in question, but also indicates interesting variation that may demonstrate how the syntactic realisation of exclamatives used by a speaker depends upon language mode and/or register. Noteworthy differences between the languages in question were also noted in the translation data. The retention of an exclamative construction was most likely in English translated language, and shifts in performativity were also noted, with Dutch tending to downscale and French to upscale in translation. The data seem to go against the idea of 'anglified subtitles', which would suggest that subtitling has a tendency to "[project] English language features", leaving "linguistic echoes of English in translated media" (Gottlieb, 2004).

(1) *What impudence!*
(2) *How brave you are.*
(3) *Quelle ambiance !*
'What an atmosphere!'
(4) *Regardez comme il est fragile.*
'Look how fragile he is.'
(5) *Wat een kampioen!*
'What a champion!'
(6) *Hoe onwijs cool is dat?*
'How incredibly cool is that?'
(OpenSubtitles 2018)

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