

THE DEPARTMENT OF LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES

THE SUBTITLING
OF
DISCOURSE PARTICLES

A corpus-based study of *well, you know, I mean, and like*, and their Swedish translations in ten American films

JENNY MATTSSON



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study is to investigate the four discourse particles (DPs) *well*, *you know*, *I mean*, and *like*, and their Swedish subtitle translations. This is done in order to see to what extent it is possible to translate these elusive words and expressions in subtitling, which is a greatly constrained form of translation. The main reason for choosing *well*, *you know*, *I mean*, and *like* for this study, is the fact that the degree of translation difficulty differs between the four DPs: *you know* and *I mean* have clear correspondences in Swedish, whereas *well* and *like* do not to the same extent.

A multimodal corpus of subtitled films was compiled especially for the present study. The corpus consists of the fully transcribed soundtrack of ten US films, each with up to four different subtitle versions, including the cinema and DVD subtitles, as well as the subtitles aired on the public service TV channel SVT and either of the two commercial TV channels TV3 and TV4. All in all, the corpus consists of approximately 420,000 words.

DPs are multifunctional and their context-dependent functions can be difficult to identify. However, analysing DPs in a multimodal film corpus often makes the identification of the DP functions possible through direct access to speakers' body language, intonation, social status, etc. A number of parameters (Svartvik 1980) are used for a closer analysis of each occurrence of *well*, *you know*, *I mean*, and *like*, including e.g. intonation, pauses, collocation, and body language of the speakers. To further facilitate the analysis of the four DPs, a cross-theoretical approach is taken. This includes aspects of three theories, i.e. Politeness theory (Brown & Levinson 1987), Coherence-based theory (Schiffrin 1987), and Relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson 1995). The translations of the DPs are analysed in terms of their pragmatic and/or grammatical realisations, as well as of various translation strategies used by the subtitlers.

Results confirm that *well*, *you know*, *I mean*, and *like* can signal both textual functions (i.e. functions signalling the structuring of discourse), and interpersonal functions (i.e. functions signalling the relation between speakers). The textual and interpersonal functions are not mutually exclusive, but one DP occurrence may have both functions simultaneously. However, it is most often possible to distinguish one DP function as more salient than other functions in a given context. The study demonstrates that the textual function of the DPs is translated more often than the interpersonal function, even though there are more DPs with an interpersonal function in the films. Nevertheless, overall, a variety of Swedish translation solutions is employed. This is in itself a verification of both the multifunctionality and versatility of each of the four DPs, and the fact that the translations often reflect the most salient functions of the DPs in the films.

In conclusion, the study shows that *well*, *you know*, *I mean*, and *like* are all translatable from English to Swedish, but in a majority of cases they are not in fact translated in the subtitles. The study also provides an insight into pragmatic functions of English and Swedish, and the fact that these two languages can express the same or similar pragmatic functions even though they do so in different ways.

Key words: subtitling, discourse particles, English/Swedish, cross-theoretical study, multimodal corpus, American films, different subtitling versions, pragmatic multifunctionality, translatability.