

The greatest stories ever filmed (mangled by outsourced subtitles)

Dalya Alberge
Arts Correspondent

Films are being lost in translation because subtitling is being done increasingly in countries such as India and Malaysia to cut costs.

British subtitlers say that the original dialogue in some films is being distorted so badly by bad translations that they do not make sense.

They cite examples such as *My Super Ex-Girlfriend*, starring Uma Thurman, whose line, "We have a zero-tolerance policy for [sexual harassment]" was translated for Taiwanese audiences as, "We hold the highest standards for sexual harassment". In *The Princess Diaries 2*, which stars Ann Hathaway, a reference to Sir David Attenborough during a discussion on insects was subtitled for Chinese speakers as Sherlock Holmes.

Deborah Chan, who specialises in Chinese translations for films, said: "There are some ridiculous mistakes. The general public suffers and the film-makers suffer."

Britain's subtitlers, who are compiling a list of errors, say that their job is not straightforward translation, but involves editing and rephrasing dialogue succinctly and with flair. They say that the domestic industry is in crisis, claiming that film studios are putting pressure on them to accept lower rates of pay or leave the industry altogether.

It takes an average of three working days to translate and subtitle a 90-minute feature film. Although some subtitlers are paid less than the minimum wage, they are still being undercut by outsourcing. Subtitlers in Taiwan, for example, are paid a fraction of British rates.

Particularly frustrating for Britain's subtitlers is that they are being asked to correct the mistakes of the people who have replaced them.

Kenn Nakata Steffensen, of London, subtitled the British film *Sixty Six* (from English to Danish) and *Spirited Away*, the

Oscar-winning animated film (from Japanese to English). He said that quality was being sacrificed. In one film, translated from English to Danish, the line "Jim is a Vietnam vet" became "Jim is veterinarian from Vietnam". In another film "flying into an asteroid field" became "flying into a steroid field" and in a television pro-

gramme "she died in a freak rugby accident" was translated into "she died in a rugby match for people with deformities".

He said: "Experienced subtitlers are being replaced by inexperienced and unqualified translators who produce poor work for incredibly low pay."

The subtitlers in countries such as India and Malaysia, he

said, often did not have the "linguistic and intercultural skills required to transmit audiovisual content to the audiences".

Guillermo del Toro, director of the Oscar-winning Spanish-language film *Pan's Labyrinth*, learnt the importance of good subtitles the hard way.

For his 2001 film *The Devil's Backbone* he discovered that

American audiences were struggling to make sense of the "awkward and cold" subtitles provided by a caption company. For *Pan's Labyrinth*, he worked on the English subtitles himself.

Leading article, page 16

T For film news, previews and reviews
timesonline.co.uk/film

Double takes



My Super Ex-Girlfriend starring Uma Thurman, above, (Taiwanese version) "We have a zero tolerance policy on this kind of thing" became: "We have a standard for sexual harassment"

Seabiscuit (Spanish DVD) "It was a ball to shoot" (ie easy) became: "It was like filming a dance scene"

Confetti (Spanish version of theatrical release) "I'm the puff, you are the straight man" became: "I'm the puff, and you're normal"

X-Men 3, below, (Taiwanese version) "I introduce our new ambassador to the UN, and the representative to the world for all US citizens" became: "I introduce the ambassador of UN, who raises his voice to represent US citizens"

Source: Deborah Chan, Kenn Nakata Steffensen and other subtitlers

