Cultural Interchangeability: The Effects of Substituting Cultural References in Subtitling

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This paper deals with the interchangeability of culture, and seeks to answer the question of whether there are situations in which culture is interchangeable, whether one item of culture could be substituted for another. On a pretheoretic level, the answer would probably be ‘no’. If you have your mind set on watching the Royal Shakespeare Company perform *The Merchant of Venice*, you are not likely to find it interchangeable with Britney Spears performing ‘Oops (I did it Again)’. However, when it comes to subtitling, where cultural substitution is a valid, though somewhat rare, translation strategy, a certain amount of cultural interchangeability seems to be presupposed. I call this strategy ‘cultural substitution’, and it means that a source culture reference is removed and, more often than not, replaced by one from the target culture.

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**Background**

The material in this paper comes from the project *Scandinavian Subtitles* (Pedersen, 2007), which is a comparative investigation of 100 Anglophone films and TV programmes and their Danish and Swedish subtitles. The aim of the project is to uncover Scandinavian subtitling norms, and find out to what degree the countries differ in this respect. As the corpus is quite extensive (covering some 130,000 subtitles), it is useful to work with a unit of comparison that can be easily isolated and compared, rather than to compare the texts in full. This use of ‘coupled pairs’ (Toury, 1995: 81) as a basis of analysis is common in the Descriptive Translation Studies paradigm. One study where a type of coupled pairs similar to the one in the present study was used is Hermans (1988). He investigated the treatment of proper names in the translations of two Dutch novels. He claims that ‘the translational norms underlying a target text as a whole can in essence be inferred from an examination of the proper names in that text’ (Hermans, 1988: 14) or that at least initial hypotheses of such norms can be founded on the handling of proper names (p. 14). In the *Scandinavian Subtitling* project, something similar to proper names has been used as the basis of investigation, namely what I call extralinguistic cultural references (ECRs). ECRs are expressions that refer to entities outside language, such as names of people, places, institutions, food, customs etc., which a person may not know, even if s/he knows the language.
in question. There is a high degree of overlap between the object of this study and the object of Hermans’ study, as the vast majority of ECRs are also proper names. There is also some degree of overlap with Leppihalme’s (1994, 1997) ‘allusions’, Nedergaard-Larsen’s (1993) ‘Culture-bound problems’ and Florin’s (1993) ‘realia’. In the Scandinavian Subtitles project, some 2500 source text (ST) ECRs of interest have been extracted, giving more than 5000 examples of translation solutions.

When a subtitler encounters an ECR in a ST, s/he has several strategies at his or her disposal for rendering it in the target text (TT) subtitles, and these are displayed in the taxonomy in Figure 1.

By far the most common strategy is to retain the ECR as it is, with just minor alterations to accommodate the rules of the target language (TL). However, these strategies are not very felicitous when an ECR is well known to the ST’s original audience, but virtually unknown to the TT audience. I call these ECRs monocultural ECRs, as opposed to transcultural ECRs, which are more or less equally accessible to both the ST and the TT audiences (cf. Leppihalme, 1994: 96; Pedersen, 2005; Welsch, 1999). When dealing with monocultural ECRs, it may be necessary for the subtitler to intervene in order to help the audience to access the ECR. This could be done by specification, generalisation or direct translation when possible. Another way of dealing with these troublesome ECRs is to replace an unknown reference with a known one, either from the source culture (SC) or from the target culture (TC), and this is where the subtitler has to presume a degree of cultural interchangeability.

This paper focuses on the strategy and effects of cultural substitution – as shown in boldface in Fig. 1. For an in-depth discussion of the other strategies, the reader is referred to Pedersen (2007).

**Cultural Substitution**

When it comes to translation strategies, there is a rich and varied flora of names by which they are known, depending on what writer you consult, and

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Figure 1 Taxonomy of subtitling strategies

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depending on what definition you use. Thus, what I (and Tveit, 2004: 55) call cultural substitution, overlaps to a high degree with what Leppihalme (2001: 141) and Nedergaard-Larsen (1993: 231) call ‘cultural adaptation’ and what Chesterman calls ‘cultural filtering’ (1997: 108). Karamitroglou (1998) calls this strategy ‘cultural transfer’. Gottlieb (forthcoming) and Hermans (1988: 13) simply call it ‘substitution’, and the term used by Vinay and Darbelnet (1958/2000: 91) is ‘Adaptation’, but the scope of solutions covered by the strategy in these last three models is broader than the one in the present study, as it includes examples of what I call ‘situational substitution’. I have opted for the term ‘cultural substitution’, as being fairly middle-of-the-road and also quite transparent in meaning. It also avoids the vagueness of ‘adaptation’, which can take place on many levels. For instance, one example of cultural adaptation would be issues stemming from honorifics and terms of address, such as the vous/tu split in French. These are not included in the present category of cultural substitution, partly because the treatment of them would fall under ‘adaptation’ and not ‘substitution’ and also because they are intra- rather than extralinguistic, and would thus not constitute ECRs.

Following what Leppihalme (1994: 94) called ‘Replacement of name by another’ (not quite as elegant as her more recent term), there are two ways in which the subtitler could avail her/himself of cultural substitution: (1) to domesticate the text by using a TC ECR or (2) to use a better known (i.e. transcultural) ECR from the SC or a third culture known both in the SC and the TC. Gottlieb suggests a three-way split of this strategy, in which the use of a transcultural ECR would be further subcategorised either into ‘replacement by a foreign element known to the target audience’ or into ‘replacement by a foreign element shared with the target culture’ (Gottlieb, forthcoming; italics in the original). This further subdivision would probably be useful when subtitling e.g. an Iranian film into German and using Anglophone Transcultural ECRs as cultural substitutes.3 However, when going from English into the Scandinavian languages, this split is not germane, as the huge majority of substituting ECRs that would be shared between the SC and the TC would originate in the SC, because of the heavy English influence in Scandinavia. Therefore, in this paper, cultural substitution will only be further split into two subcategories: substitution by a transcultural ECR and substitution by a TC ECR. These will be dealt with in turn below, starting with substitution by transcultural ECR, as that is the least complicated.

Cultural substitution by transcultural ECR

In the least marked form a transcultural ECR is used to replace the ST ECR. In these cases, the ECR may be a more widely known SC ECR or a transcultural ECR from a third culture. An example of this is (1) below, from the sitcom dramedy M*A*S*H. Here, a character called Colonel Flagg, who is a rather macho US Army intelligence officer, is explaining to the camp C.O., Colonel Potter, how he has trained himself not to laugh or smile:

(1) I watched a hundred hours of The Three Stooges. Every time I felt like smiling, I jabbed myself in the stomach with a cattle prod.
In Example (1), the ST ECR refers to *The Three Stooges*, a comedy trio from the 1930s onwards, which are known to everybody in the USA. However, *The Three Stooges* movies never made it to Scandinavia, so the reference would be obscure to Scandinavian audiences. The Danish subtitler has made the reference to famous American comedians accessible to the viewers by replacing *The Stooges* with *Laurel and Hardy*, who are very well known in Scandinavia, and who are from roughly the same period. There is thus no credibility gap in the subtitles. Briefly, a credibility gap may appear when subtitled SC characters are seen to use TC ECRs; it is what Nedergaard-Larsen (1993: 231) calls ‘credibility problems’ and Gottlieb (1994: 51) calls ‘authenticity problems’ (my translation). There is nothing odd about the utterance in (1): Flagg might just as well have referred to *Laurel and Hardy*; they were popular American comedians in the early 1950s, the era in which *M*A*S*H* is set. The only problem is that he did not; he referred to *The Three Stooges*, so if the viewers notice the ST–TT difference here, through what Gottlieb (1997: 93) calls ‘the feedback-effect from the original’, the subtitle might be seen as ‘incorrect’, as relaying the ‘wrong’ information, even as being an ‘error’. I would like to claim that it is not an error at all; it is a highly felicitous (see Pedersen, forthcoming) translation solution. The difference is that the equivalence of the solution is ‘dynamic’, rather than ‘formal’ to use Nida’s (1964: 159) terms; we have a ‘communicative’, rather than ‘semantic’ translation (Newmark, 1988: 22). In other words, the subtitler has sought equivalence of effect, rather than equivalence of information in (1). The Swedish subtitler of the same episode has opted for generalisation here, referring only to ‘entertainment’, rather than any specific group of entertainers.

Let us look at what effects the use of transcultural ECR substitution has on the TT subtitles. The overall effect (if this strategy is used profusely, or as a macro-level strategy choice) could be said to be ‘centripetal’ (cf. Gottlieb, 2000: 22), i.e. it removes the more exotic and peripheral ECRs and replaces them with ECRs that are more common and central. Following Toury’s (1995: 267 ff.) first law of translation, the effect could also be said to be ‘standardising’. The viewers are not exposed to new ECRs, but to familiar ones, and this makes the TT more accessible or more bland, depending on your point of view.

From the subtitler’s point of view, unlike using a TC ECR as cultural substitute, this strategy does not create a credibility gap (see below). It could be argued, however, that the strategy creates an ethical gap, and may thus go against the subtitler’s ‘accountability norm’ (cf. Chesterman, 1997: 68). This is because the strategy involves a breach of reference: the ST ECR refers to one ECR; the TT ECR to another. So, in one way of looking at it, the subtitler is ‘lying’ to his/her audience. Looking at the solution from another perspective, the subtitler simply helps the viewer to access the ST in an easy and
comfortable way. Furthermore, this strategy is unusual when considering Levy’s (1967/2000: 156) ‘minimax strategy’. In brief, the minimax strategy means that you try to get the maximum effect (in this case accessibility to the ST) with the minimum effort (for the subtitler). Cultural substitution is unusual in that in order to achieve this maximum effect, the subtitler has to sacrifice much of her/his minimum effort, as this strategy involves hard work in the form of research to find a suitable cultural substitute. Other methods, primarily retention, but also generalisation or specification, which offer some guidance to the viewers, are much less time-consuming. However, the strategy has the advantage over other strategies, primarily specification and paraphrase, in that it is space-efficient, which is always a factor in subtitling, which is a constrained form of translation (cf. De Linde & Kay, 1999; Titford, 1982; and others).

The fact that it is heavy on the max side of the minimax strategy may explain why it is so rare. In the Scandinavian Subtitles corpus, only 10 Danish instances of substituting a ST ECR by a Transcultural ECR were found, giving it but 0.2% of the total translation solutions found. As for Swedish examples, there was only one very marginal example, which is reproduced below as Example (2). It is from the sitcom The Office, where the office bully, Chris Finch, is moving his body and making noises to simulate sexual intercourse for laughs, and he utters:

(2) Squeal, piggy!
   Swedish subtitle:
   Kom igen, Miss Piggy!
   Back-translation:
   Come on, Miss Piggy!
   (Office 11: 2.38)

In Example (2), Finch is quoting a line from the rape scene in the 1972 movie Deliverance. The Swedish subtitle instead has a reference to one of the characters in The Muppet Show, so it could be argued that a cultural substitution by a transcultural ECR has taken place. However, it is also possible to analyse the translation in another way. If the subtitler has not recognised the allusion to Deliverance, and instead thought that the ST reference was indeed to Miss Piggy, then the strategy used was not cultural substitution at all, but completion. Without methods of introspective assessment (Chesterman, 1997: 136 ff.) of translators’ decision-making processes, such as think-aloud protocols (cf. e.g. Mossop, 2000), it is probably impossible to know which analysis is better. However, the context suggests the second analysis as being the more likely one. This is just one example of how many ECR renderings end up in grey areas between two strategies. In any case, the strategy is extremely rare, even more so in Sweden than in Denmark. Anecdotally, I have once found it used in Swedish subtitles outside the Scandinavian Subtitles corpus. This was in another episode of M*A*S*H, where the ubiquitous Three Stooges were rendered as Donald Duck’s nephews: Huey, Dewey and Louie.
Cultural substitution by target culture ECR

In a more marked form, the ST ECR is replaced by a TC ECR. This is the most domesticating of all strategies for rendering ECRs (cf. Venuti, 1995: 19–20) in that it completely removes a foreign element and replaces it with a domestic one. Or, to put it in the words of Schleiermacher (1813/1998: 118), it is a technique designed ‘to leave the reader alone as much as possible and bring the writer to him’ (my translation). Just like cultural substitution by a transcultural ECR, this strategy is heavy on the max side of the minimax strategy, space-efficient and it also involves a breach of reference. Sometimes, this breach of reference is very subtle and barely perceptible to the viewers, and that is when the strategy is used in certain domains where there is a long-standing tradition of using cultural substitution. These domains are ECRs dealing with titles, the governmental sector, the educational system and food & beverages. An example of a government body being rendered by TC Substitution is the Swedish translation of (3). The Danish subtitler has chosen direct translation, as the Danish TC ECR would have been kriminalforsorgens ledelse, the length of which would be forbidding for any subtitler, if there was an alternative.

\[(3)\] the Prison Board  
Swedish subtitle: Kriminalvårdssstyrelsen  
Danish subtitle: Fængselsstyrelsen  
(Tango & Cash: 30.53)

In the following examples, we see how titles (4), education (5) and food (6) are rendered by similar ECRs from the TC.

\[(4)\] City Council members  
Swedish subtitle: medlemmar i kommunfullmäktige  
(CBS 37: 36.07)

\[(5)\] junior high  
Swedish subtitle: högstadiet  
(Meet the Parents: 40.55)

\[(6)\] French toast  
Swedish subtitle: fattiga riddare  
(Simple Life 8: 17.54)

The Scandinavian viewers seem to be used to this, and there is probably not even much awareness that the ST ECR has been replaced by a TC ECR. The evidence of this is that the transcultural ECRs rendered in this way are lexicalised, and found in most bilingual dictionaries, which means that they are official equivalents.
Let me digress for a moment, to explain what I mean by an official equivalent. This is highly relevant to the present study, as there is a close connection between official equivalent and cultural substitution (which often acts as such an equivalent). This connection explains why nine tenths of all instances of cultural substitution do not cause credibility gaps. An official equivalent is constructed in one of two ways.

It could be constructed through some official decision by someone who has authority over the ECR in question (cf. Hermans’ discussion of EU translations etc. 2003: 40). One example of this is that the parliaments of the Scandinavian countries have decided that the metric system should be used in these countries, which means that whenever some measurement is given in feet, it is (almost) always given in metres in Scandinavia. Another example is (7), where someone makes a reference to the TV drama series E.R.:

(7) E.R.
Swedish subtitle: Cityakuten
Danish subtitle: E.R.

(Coyote Ugly: 1.13.23)

A back-translation of the Swedish subtitle in (7) would read something like ‘the city emergency ward’, so in this case, the official equivalent has been created using a combination of direct translation and specification. The point here, however, is that an official equivalent has been created through an official decision, similar to the case of the parliament decision to go metric. Granted, the decision is of much less importance and effects far fewer people, but someone in charge of the ECR (in the case of (7), probably the Swedish broadcaster who imported the series) has decided that E.R. should be rendered as Cityakuten in Sweden. All other renderings would be incorrect, or at least unsanctioned by those in authority of the ECR. This is actually what has happened in the case of the Danish subtitle of this passage, which is based on retention, as the Danish official equivalent is Skadestuen, which is based on direct translation. What makes this rendering less felicitous (apart from the rather slim risk of incurring the wrath of the official decision-makers) is that the TT viewers are used to the official equivalent, and are unlikely to recognise other renderings.

This brings us to the second way in which an official equivalent can be created: through entrenchment. If a SC ECR is always rendered in a particular way in the TC, an official equivalent has been established through entrenchment. These are what Leppihalme (1994: 94) calls ‘standard translations’ or ‘a preformed TL version’. Chesterman’s (1997: 9) pragmatic definition of an equivalent is: ‘an ST item X is invariably translated into a given TL as Y’. These are the equivalents you find in standard bilingual dictionaries. An example would be that the Statue of Liberty is always rendered as Frihedsjudinden in Danish.

As we have seen, official equivalents can be based on just about any translation strategy. It is most common to use retention, but direct translation is also common, and so is cultural substitution. There is a rationale for dealing
with official equivalents in a category of their own and not merely as
transcultural examples of their ‘parent’ strategy. This is that it is not unusual
for official equivalents to have no linguistic link to the SC ECR whatever. An
example of this would be that *Winnie the Pooh* is called *Peter Plys* in Denmark,
or that the Swedish official equivalent of the 1989 movie *Next of Kin*, starring
Patrick Swayze, is *Dirty Fighting*. In these cases, the official equivalent is not
based on any translation strategy at all.

So, a common source for an official equivalent is a cultural substitute from
the TC. This is the case when it comes to military titles, so that for instance a *second lieutenant* has the Swedish Official Equivalent *fänrik*. There are many
examples of established official equivalents based on cultural substitutions
like this. However, not all cultural substitutions are official equivalents, and
this is because they are neither firmly entrenched, nor has there been any
official decision that has established the equivalent. There are some difficult
demarcation issues here. In some renderings where it appears that an official
equivalent has been used, it often turns out that a non-entrenched cultural
substitute has been used instead. Three examples of this can be found in (8),
from *Midsomer Murders*, where we find different versions of (Detective) Chief
Inspector Barnaby’s title.

(8) Swedish subtitles: Danish subtitles:
 a) kommissarie vicekriminalkommissær
    (Midsomer Murders 24: 22.2) kriminalkommissær
 b) överkommissarie   (Midsomer Murders 17: 8.27) kriminalkommissær
 c) kommissarie       (Midsomer Murders 18: 35.05) kriminalkommissær

When it comes to American police titles, *Captain* seems to have the
Scandinavian official equivalents *kommissarie/kommissær*, as can be seen in
Example (9):

(9) Captain
    Swedish subtitle: Kommissarie
    Danish subtitle: kommissær
    (Tango & Cash: 11.08)

However, throughout the corpus (which includes quite a few ‘cop movies’) one finds that *Captain* is rendered not only as *kommissarie/kommissær*, but also as
*polischef* (*L.A. Confidential*: 6.47) and *intendent* (*Police Academy*: 6.28) in
Swedish, and as *chefinspektör* (*L.A. Confidential*: 6.47), *kriminalinspektør* (*Striking Distance* 1.11.43), *politiinspektør* (*Police Academy*: 6.28) and the neologism *politi-
kaptajn* (*Midnight Run*: 51.38) in Danish. If one reverses the process, one finds
that *kommissarie/kommissær* substitutes not only for *Captain* but also for
*Lieutenant* (24 (3) 15: 25.12), *Detective* (*Mercury Rising*: 25.44) and *Sergeant*
(*L.A. Confidential* 2.03.29).
Results

I hope to have shown above that there is a strong link between cultural substitution and the use of an official equivalent. The fact that not all cultural substitutes that seem to be official equivalents actually are official equivalents is probably not something that worries the average viewer. This is very likely the reason why cultural substitution is so commonly and felicitously used in the domains where you also often find official equivalents, namely in the domains of titles, the government sector, education and – to a lesser degree – food & beverages. Even though the cultural substitutes are not entrenched enough to be official equivalents, they are used often enough to ‘feel’ like official equivalents. There is also a considerable grey area of semi-entrenched cultural substitutes that are ‘almost’ official equivalents. Evidence of this can be found in bilingual dictionaries (e.g. Norstedts, 2000) where semi-entrenched cultural substitutes are listed with a modifying phrase such as ‘ung. motsv.’ (short for ‘approximately equivalent to’). These cultural substitutes could be called quasi-official equivalents.

If we look at the statistics for the distribution of cultural substitution over domains (Figure 2), we find that it is indeed in the above-mentioned domains that TC cultural substitution is the most common.

In the corpus, TC cultural substitution is used overall almost as much by Swedish as by Danish subtitlers. The total number is 101 Swedish instances against 112 Danish instances. If we keep in mind that the corpus contains more than 5000 TT ECR renderings, it does not amount to much. Even if you take the transcultural cultural substitutions into account as well, the total number is only 224 instances, or about 4.5% of the total, so cultural substitution is a fairly limited phenomenon. In Figure 2, we find that the use of TC cultural substitution is most common in titles and in the government sector in both languages.

Even though the practice in the two countries is fairly similar when it comes to purely quantitative usage of this strategy, Figure 2 clearly shows that there is an important difference in where this strategy is used. Granted, the figures for most of the domains are similar, but we find a difference when we look at the column marking the generic ‘other’ domain. In Sweden, it is very rare for TC cultural substitution to be used in other domains than the ones discussed.
above, and when it is, the cultural substitute is almost invariably of the quasi-official kind, e.g. (10)

(10) Halloween  
Swedish subtitle:  
Allhelgonaafton  
(Karate Kid 33.2)

In Danish subtitles, however, you find TC cultural substitution in many domains, such as entertainment, media, corporations and currency. One example of this comes from the comic book-based movie *The Mask*, where the main character tries to bribe his way into an exclusive party:

(11) Bouncer: Are you on the list?  
The Mask: No. But I believe my friends are. Perhaps you know them.  
(Shows bundles of cash) Franklin, Grant and Jackson.  
(The Mask 35.32)

In the Danish subtitles, the names of the presidents whose countenances grace the dollar bills in the original have been replaced by common Danish slang expressions for Danish bills, namely Plovmand, Hund og Tudse, which refer to the Danish 500, 100 and 1000 kroner bills, respectively. At a stretch, these names could also refer to last names or nicknames of actual people, thus completing the joke. By referring to Danish money, however, the subtitles suggest that the action has suddenly been moved to Denmark. Another example of how TC cultural substitution is used where it is not expected is (12), which comes from a parody of spy thrillers, a spoof titled *Spy Hard*. An American spy is trying to deduce facts about another spy. The skopos (cf. Vermeer, 1989/2000) of the utterance is to make a joke based on a profusion of anagrams and abbreviations, and among these are (12) below:

(12) You received your Ph.D. at N.Y.U  
    Danish subtitle:  
    Du blev CAND. MAG. på KUA.  
    Back-translation:  
    You became an M.A. at KUA.  
    (Spy Hard: 39.17).

I would say that the solutions chosen in Examples (11) and (12) presume a very high degree of cultural interchangeability. Genre plays a major role here. The use of TC cultural substitution of the kind represented by (11) and (12) is found almost exclusively in comedy. The only exception was found in a reality show, *The Simple Life* (1.5: 7.47), where the co-op is rendered as Brugsen. A case could be made for calling this solution quasi-official, though. The reason for this Danish practice could be, as Gottlieb (2000: 51) points out: ‘the informative aspect [is] secondary in the comedy genre’. This is because the primary aspect is that of humour, and this leaves more room for cultural interchangeability in comedy than in other genres, where the information aspect is primary. However, it is extremely rare (there are no examples in the corpus) for a Swedish subtitler to use cultural substitution in the way illustrated by (11) and
(12), so this suggests a difference in the norms of the two countries, the cause of which we will return to presently.

**Making and Breaking a ‘Contract of Illusion’**

In order to discuss the effects of TC cultural substitution, I would first like to propose something about the nature of watching subtitled television. Let me first quote Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Whenever we encounter an object of art, like a statue, a painting or a poem, we make use of ‘the willing suspension of disbelief for the moment that constitutes poetic faith’ (Coleridge, 1817/1985: 314). The same is true when we watch fiction on television or go to the cinema. For instance, ‘[i]n any fiction film the spectator knows very well that the actor and character are not the same, yet at the same time must believe that they are for the film to work’ (De Cordova, 1986: 132). The same goes for the story, the setting etc. In other words, the viewer has to suspend his/her disbelief in order to enjoy the movie. What I would like to propose is that the viewers extend this suspension of disbelief to the subtitles. There is a tacit agreement, a ‘contract of illusion’ if you will, between the subtitler and the viewers that the subtitles *are* the dialogue, that what you read is actually what people say. In reality, of course, it is not. For one thing, the verbal material is in another mode, writing instead of speech, and this means that the code is also changed from spoken to written. In practice this means that only a few oral forms are retained in the subtitles. The language is cleaned up; more often than not, hesitations, false starts etc. are excluded, and this is a good thing too; if not, the TT would look very messy, or as Gottlieb (2000: 20) puts it: ‘the deletion or condensation of redundant, oral features is a necessity when crossing over from speech to writing’. Furthermore, there is the oft-cited (cf. e.g. De Linde & Kay, 1999: 51; Lomheim, 1995; Tveit, 2004: 58) condensation issue. What you read is on average about a third shorter than what people say (Gottlieb, 1997: 73). And even more strikingly, in interlingual subtitling, what is written is in another language than what is said. Taking all this into account means that it requires quite a good deal of willing suspension of disbelief for the viewers to sign the contract of illusion. However, in Scandinavia people grow up with subtitling, and the contract of illusion is something they have internalised. So, the viewers are willing to suspend their disbelief, and as part of their commitment to the contract of illusion, the subtitlers have traditionally tried to make their work as unobtrusive as possible, hence the focus on a ‘transparent’ (Gottlieb, 2000: 51) translation, or as Lindberg puts it at the end of his guidelines for Danish subtitlers: ‘the good subtitles are the ones you *never* notice’ (my translation, italics in the original).

The use of TC cultural substitution may break the contract of illusion. Or as Gottlieb (1994: 50) puts it, when discussing very TL-oriented translations: ‘the illusion of the translation as the alter ego of the original is broken’ (my translation). This may be the case if cultural substitution is used in domains other than the established ones, where a cultural substitute has the function of a quasi-official equivalent. When this happens, a credibility gap opens up. How can the viewers believe that the Mask is paying his way into a club in the USA with Danish currency? How can the viewers believe that a spy, who
certainly does not seem Danish, has got her degree from the Humanities Faculty of the University of Copenhagen? One possible answer is that they do not. Instead, the audience views the TT ECR as a shortcut of:

The speaker referred to an ECR which is in some relevant way similar to the ECR we call X

X stands for the TT ECR. This gives a clue as to what is meant to be conveyed when TC cultural substitution is used. What is conveyed could never be reference; the breach of reference makes that impossible. Instead, what are conveyed are connotations, as illustrated by the word ‘similar’ in the formula above. In Example (11), the connotations conveyed are slang expressions of bills, with the (farfetched) possibility of also conveying names of people. In (12) the connotation conveyed is a (locally) well known seat of higher learning, commonly referred to by an abbreviated form. Also, it is important that the proper connotations are conveyed, hence the adverbial addition ‘in some relevant way’.

Things are not just white or black, though. Credibility gaps can be said to be of different magnitudes, from mere trenches to abysses, as it were. It could be claimed that small credibility gaps appear even when using TC cultural substitution in the food & beverages domain, if the TT ECR is too entrenched in the TC. Thus, dishes that carry with them very Swedish or Danish connotations, e.g. ostkaka or smørrebrød, are likely to cause credibility gaps if used as cultural substitutes. This may be why TC cultural substitution in the food & beverage domain is often combined with the generalisation strategy. This is the case in Example (13), from The Hi-Lo Country, where a Texan woman says:

(13) Come on in, I’ll make you boys griddle cakes.  
Danish subtitle:  
Kom ind, så laver jeg en omgang pandekager.  
(Hi-Lo Country 48.08)

What we see in (13) is that the ST ECR griddle cakes, which admittedly could be said to be a form of pancakes, has been rendered as pandekager (Danish pancakes) in Danish, and the Swedish solution is similar. So, instead of using a TC ECR that was culturally bound, a more generic term was used, thus minimising the credibility gap.13 Other examples of minor credibility gaps can be found when TV programmes from the SC are substituted by TC TV programmes. There are two Danish examples of this in the corpus in the same sentence, which is taken from The Office:

(14) Imagine a cross between Telly Addicts and Noel’s House Party.  
Danish subtitle:  
Forestil dig et kryds mellem ‘Ugen der gak’ og ‘Husk lige tandbørsten’.  
(Office 11: 16.15)

Both programmes were mentioned in passing, and the Danish substitutes (Ugen der gak and Husk lige tandbørsten) are from the same genre. One could speculate that the reasoning behind the substitution might have been based on the fact that many Scandinavian TV programmes (e.g. Jeopardy!, Who Wants to
be a Millionaire, Antiques Roadshow) are syndicated and based on Anglophone formats. The idea might then have been that, as the TT audience are used to seeing Danish names replacing foreign names of TV shows, you might 'get away with' replacing the odd British programme with original Danish productions. Be that as it may, and leaving aside the ethics of it, as this is a purely descriptive study, it is a swift mode of communicating the connotations of what were in this context marginal ECRs. The credibility gap here is arguably greater than in (13), though, but perhaps not as great as in (11) or (12). The Swedish subtitler has opted for retention here.

The advantage of using TC cultural substitution is thus that connotations, if not reference, are conveyed in a space-efficient and striking way. By writing Plovmand, Hund og Tudse in (11), the subtitler does not have to explain that American dollar bills have certain famous people on them, and that these were referred to in a jocular manner, which would have been impossible, given the time and space constraints of the medium (not to mention ruining the joke). The other possibility, retention (which typically was used by the Swedish subtitler), may render the joke incomprehensible to many viewers. The limits of using TC cultural substitution in this way would be set by what Chesterman (1997: 64) calls expectancy norms: 'Expectancy norms are established by the expectations of readers of a translation (of a given type) concerning what a translation (of this type) should be like'. If the solution chosen in (11) goes against the expectancy norms (as it probably would in Sweden), it would cause a credibility gap and thus break the contract of illusion, alerting the viewers to the fact that they are actually reading subtitles, and – in their opinion – faulty subtitles at that. Because, as Hermans (1991: 166, quoted by Chesterman, 1997: 64) puts it: 'when translators do what is expected of them, they will be seen to have done well'. Consequently, if something like the solution in (12) was used in Sweden, the subtitlers would not be seen to have done well. The Swedish expectancy norm seems to be divergent from the Danish norm in this area. To find the source of these seemingly divergent norms, we must look at the national norms diachronically.

**Diachrony of TC Cultural Substitution in Denmark and Sweden**

The *Scandinavian Subtitles* corpus is not very well suited for diachronic investigations, as the lion’s share of it consists of contemporary subtitles, as this was the object for which it was compiled. It has, however, been complemented by some older material. Notably, it contains four episodes of *M*A*S*H*, which were subtitled in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Example (1) stems from one of these episodes. Granted, four episodes make for very poor statistics, particularly when it comes to a phenomenon as rare as cultural substitution. It should nevertheless be pointed out that whereas the Danish subtitles of these episodes contain three examples of this strategy, the Swedish subtitles contain only one. This single Swedish example is predictably in the food & beverages domain (*Jell-O* replaced by *gelépudding* (*M*A*S*H* 5 (24): 9,08)). There is thus a possibility that the Danish expectancy
norm once tolerated a more frequent use of this domesticating translation strategy.

To further investigate whether the expectancy production norms in Denmark and Sweden were once (even) more divergent when it comes to the acceptability of this strategy, I carried out a series of interviews with both Danish and Swedish subtitling professionals and policymakers. According to Swedish policymakers representing both public service (Kampmann, Åkerberg) and commercial (Norberg, Bengtsson) subtitling houses, the Swedish norm has always been against using cultural substitution, apart from the quasi-official equivalent kind. That this was also the actual practice was confirmed by a Swedish subtitler who has been active for more than 30 years (Scheer). The situation in Denmark looks different. According to Danish policymakers (Heide Olsen) and subtitlers (Højgaard) the practice of using cultural substitution outside the domains mentioned above is distinctly old-fashioned. In both public service (according to Heide Olsen) and commercial subtitling (Højgaard et al.) there was a change of policy in the early 1990s, when cultural substitution started to be phased out in Danish subtitles. Interestingly enough, both informants cite TV series starring Mel Smith and Griff Rhys-Jones, namely, Not the 9 O’Clock News (Heide Olsen) and Alas Smith and Jones (Højgaard), as triggers for the change of policy. This is probably coincidental, apart from the fact that both shows contained a multitude of British ECRs, and were aired in Denmark (though not in Britain) within a relatively short period of time. The Danish subtitler of Not the 9 O’Clock News is even reported by Gottlieb (1994: 50) to have admitted that they had ‘overstepped the credibility threshold’ (my translation) when substituting Danish businessmen for British ones. Presumably, the ‘credibility threshold’ was not felt to be overstepped when Danish TV shows replaced British ones in the subtitles of The Office 15 years later, as we have seen in Example (14).

If one looks at the situation today, as represented prescriptively by in-house guidelines, the result coincides with the empirical data presented in this study. It should perhaps be pointed out that the prescriptive and descriptive norms in a field need not coincide, but in this case they do. Danish subtitling guidelines do not mention cultural substitution at all, but point out that if there is an official equivalent, this should be used (Lindberg). Swedish guidelines actually forbid or discourage the use of cultural substitution, apart from its usage in the domains mentioned above. Instead, they recommend the use of generalisation (LanguageLand/SpråkCentrum, SDI), retention (SDI) or specification (SVT). It should be pointed out that SDI is a multinational company and that the guidelines that apply in Sweden should apply in Denmark as well.

So, it seems to be the case that the Swedish and Danish norms are not diverging after all, but in fact converging. Further evidence of this is found in Lomheim (2000: 113–116) where both Danish (Mortensen) and Swedish (Ivarsson) subtitling experts are quoted as declaring that Scandinavian subtitling norms are becoming more homogeneous. It is perhaps symptomatic of this development that some of the Danish Cultural Substitution examples displayed in this paper were greeted as ‘old-fashioned’ by Danish subtitling students at the University of Copenhagen in 2006. It is even more symptomatic
that it was frowned upon when a subtitler of *The Simpsons* tried to use the strategy in Sweden recently, presumably thinking that it would be acceptable in the surreal context of this cartoon sitcom.

**Discussion**

We thus find that the national norms in Sweden and Denmark before the 1990s diverged in that the expectancy norm in Denmark allowed for more cultural substitution by a TC referent in domains other than those of government, titles, education and food & beverages. This practice has since changed, and even though we can still find traces of it, as in Examples (11), (12) and (14), the norms in Denmark are now more similar to the Swedish norms in that they avoid this strategy, except in the aforementioned domains, and then almost exclusively in the comedy genre. Thus, the expectancy norms in Scandinavia are these days against this kind of cultural interchangeability, even though it is accepted in certain domains.

This converging development is also paralleled by a homogenisation of quantitative subtitling norms of exposure time, cueing speed etc. (cf. Pedersen, 2004) The reasons for this are partly an overall homogenisation of subtitling norms that is caused by central cueing 14 and other practices that come from subtitling firms now operating on a Scandinavian, or even European – rather than national – level. Mainly, however, the cause could probably be found in the rise of globalisation, and the Anglicisation of Scandinavia. Scandinavians today are even more aware of Anglophone culture in general, and American culture in particular, than they were 20 years ago, so the need for cultural substitution has lessened, and also become slightly absurd from the viewers’ point of view. In other words, the expectancy norm has changed. This has resulted in cultural substitution losing ground in Denmark, and in Sweden all forms of interventional strategies (cf. Fig. 1) are losing ground, according to Akerberg.

The acceptability of this kind of cultural interchangeability apparently varies between countries. As we have seen, the Danes used to accept it, but the norm has now changed (even though Nedergaard-Larsen (1993: 231) mentioned this kind of ‘credibility problem’ as early as 1993). The Swedes have never really accepted it. In Finland, Leppihalme (1996: 214) points out the consternations this sort of cultural interchangeability may cause in translation in general. However, she has also claimed that ‘target cultural replacements may be more often acceptable in film and television than in print’ (Leppihalme, 1994: 158), something which is not verified by the present study. One needs to look at expectancy norms empirically, though. Gottlieb (forthcoming) has many examples of the strategy being used in English subtitles of Danish films, even though Venuti (prescriptively) opposed it vehemently when it comes to translations from minor languages into English already in 1995.

When used in the domains where the expectancy norms allow it, TC cultural substitution is a handy tool for conveying connotations in a space-efficient way. However, it may involve quite an effort on the subtitler’s part to find a felicitous cultural substitute to convey the proper connotations. As this
strategy is extremely TL-oriented and extinguishes all reference to (if not all connotations of) the ST ECR, the subtitler takes on a huge responsibility when using it. In the corpus, there is evidence of this responsibility being beyond the care or knowledge of the subtitler. Consider Example (15), again from M*A*S*H, subtitled into Danish prior to the change of policy that made the strategy rare. In this episode, the company clerk, Corporal Walter ‘Radar’ O’Reilly, has, through some devious shenanigans, suddenly become second Lieutenant. He is trying to work out what privileges his new position brings with it, and thus asks Major Houlihan:

(15) O’Reilly: Is it OK if I try the officers’ latrine?
    Houlihan: Of course.
    O’Reilly: O boy! National Geographic!

Danish subtitle:
Så kan jeg læse Bo Bedre.

Back-translation:
Then I can read Bo Bedre.

In Example (15), the ST ECR National Geographic (Magazine), which was not transcultural at the time, was rendered as the Danish interior-decorating magazine Bo Bedre. There is a credibility gap here, but it might not be too severe, as the TT audience might be led to think that Bo Bedre is actually called National Geographic in English (similar to the substituted TV programmes in (14) above). The connotations that are conveyed are thus those of a glossy magazine, and apparently one can enjoy those in the officers’ latrine. However, the crucial connotation, the one that makes this joke funny in the original context, is the notion that, in the early 1950s, because of the magazine’s ethnographic articles, National Geographic was the only place where a young man could legitimately see half-naked women. I think it is safe to claim that the chances of seeing half-naked women in Bo Bedre are very slim indeed. Thus, even though some of the connotations have been carried across, the germane ones were lost. Remember the adverbial addition in the proposed formula above, that the TT ECR should be similar to the ST ECR ‘in some relevant way’. The point here is that if a subtitler takes it upon her/himself to remove a SC ECR and replace it with a TC ECR in order to convey its connotations, s/he has the responsibility (at least) of making sure that the right connotations are conveyed. Otherwise, it could be argued that s/he has broken what Chesterman (1997: 68) calls ‘the accountability norm’.

Summary and Conclusions
So, when is culture interchangeable? When it comes to Scandinavian subtitling, culture is interchangeable in the domains of government, education, titles and food & beverages, because in these domains, the TT audience are liable to accept them as quasi-official equivalents. Outside these domains, it used to be more interchangeable in Denmark than in Sweden, but this difference is now fading. It is also more interchangeable in comedy than in
other genres, because in this genre, the breach of reference is not as important as the equivalence of effect. Cultural substitution using a TC ECR is ten times as common as using a transcultural ECR, which may appear odd, as transcultural ECRs do not cause credibility gaps.

Some conclusions that can be drawn from this study are quite unsurprisingly that expectancy norms vary not only from audience to audience. Perhaps more interestingly, we have also seen how the viewers’ expectations are mirrored in the practice of the subtitlers, as the number of instances of a practice which seemed ‘old-fashioned’ to the audience is dwindling. This is a fine illustration of what Chesterman (1997: 64) must have meant when he claimed that ‘product norms are ultimately constituted by the expectancies of the target language readership’. Perhaps more controversially, extrapolating from the findings of this study, it could be argued that in a globalised world, there is less room for cultural interchangeability. Be that as it may, it is at least safe to say that there is less need for the particular kind of cultural interchangeability discussed in this paper in a globalised world, because when the TT audience knows the ST ECR, there is no point in replacing it.

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Notes

1. And some Norwegian, but that data will not be included in this paper, as the Norwegian section of the corpus is too small and skewed to give valid evidence on cultural substitution.
2. For a fuller definition, see Pedersen, 2005.
3. I owe this observation to Mandana Taban of the University of Vienna.
4. In this paper, back-translations will only be provided if the TT is something other than a literal rendering of the ST.
5. Except in certain contexts, such as flight altitudes, where feet may still be used (e.g. 400 feet rendered as 400 fod and 400 fot in the Scandinavian subtitles of Broken Arrow (10.5).
6. The example comes from Mercury Rising: 24.37.
9. Even if Leppihalme (2001: 142) claims that ‘[i]t seems that subtitlers and translators of children’s books particularly favour this strategy’.
11. The Faculty of Humanities of the University of Copenhagen.
12. This is similar to the ‘suspension of linguistic disbelief’ found in dubbing by Romero Fresco (2006).
13. This solution could be claimed to be generalisation in combination with direct translation, but as American pancakes are quite a different creature from Danish pancakes, this is hardly the case. Danish pancakes would for instance hardly be served for breakfast, as American pancakes frequently are.
14. The practice of using the time code of a first generation translation, as well as that translation itself, as a basis for second-generation TTs.
15. This was before the magazine was established in Scandinavia. Retention, the strategy used by the Swedish subtitler at that time, was thus not very felicitous either.
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