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Weighty Words? Translating *The Biggest Loser* for European Audiences

Abstract: First shown in the United States in 2004, *The Biggest Loser* is one of the most successful and enduring reality television shows. The format has been exported internationally, and domestic variants of the show remain extremely popular in many European countries. From a translation perspective, however, the title of the show provides a challenge, as the original English conveys not only the idea of losing weight, but also the oxymoronic notion of a 'loser' ironically being a winner. This contribution, therefore, provides an overview of the strategies used to deal with this issue through examination of the local titles given to *The Biggest Loser* in thirteen European countries. An initial analysis aimed to ascertain if the title had actually been translated into the local language, either fully or partially, taking into account associated cultural implications regarding English language proficiency. Subsequently, the titles were examined to see if aspects of the original were present, such as wordplay and the element of transformation. Finally, the titles were analysed to see if there were any common geographical or linguistic similarities between the various translation strategies.

Key words: *The Biggest Loser*, title, translation, reality television

Introduction

With reality television programmes seemingly ubiquitous around the globe, the issue of adapting generic formats to local languages, cultures, and trends is well-attested in the literature (for example, see Moran, 2008, 2009; Chalaby, 2011; Almaimam, 2012; Mikos, & Perrotta, 2012; Zimdars 2019). One aspect that remains under-researched, however, concerns the translation strategies of the titles of these programmes. Taking the title of the popular reality television show *The Biggest Loser* as a point of departure, this exploratory study aims to explore this issue in further detail. This analysis will be conducted by examining the translation strategies utilised with regard to the local titles of the show in thirteen different European countries.

The Biggest Loser

The Biggest Loser was originally first shown in the United States in 2004, where it was broadcast on the NBC network. The premise of the show is simple; under the guidance of personal trainers, overweight contestants – either in teams or as individuals – compete to lose the biggest percentage of their overall bodyweight. Sequestered away at an isolated location, contestants have only themselves and the personal trainers for company, thus heightening the dramatic nature of the programme. Aside from intensive exercise regimes, the format is livened up by a variety of physical and mental challenges, guidelines on nutrition and healthy eating, and also the competitive weekly weigh-in, where participants find out how much weight they have lost in a given week. Following this event,

participants choose a poorly-performing contestant to be eliminated from the competition; nonetheless, the majority of eliminated contestants continue their weight-loss journey at home. The culmination of each series is the show's finale. In front of a studio audience, the finalists are weighed, and the participant who has lost the largest proportion of their original bodyweight is awarded the title of "Biggest Loser", as well as a significant cash prize.

Despite its popularity with audiences, as demonstrated by the eighteen seasons of the show that have been broadcast to date in the United States, *The Biggest Loser* has been somewhat controversial. Concerning the health implications, it has been argued that the programme promotes an unrealistic and even unsafe portrayal of weight loss, with contestants losing multiple kilograms per week, rather than the more modest amounts typically recommended by health professionals (Hall 2013; Klos et al., 2015). In addition to the speed of their weight loss, concerns have been raised about the overall amount of weight lost by the winning contestants, with some concerns that it may be unhealthy.

With regard to the original American edition of the show, academic studies have also illustrated that the speed and amount of weight lost during the programme can also lead to unwelcome and permanent changes to the contestants' metabolism, thus making their weight loss unsustainable (Fothergill et al., 2016). Former participants, too, have voiced their dissent about some of the weight-loss methods used as well as the way they were treated during the programme (Fell, 2016; Hamann, 2016). The show has also been called out for fat-shaming, as well as for promoting so-called "beach body" aesthetics rather than representing a more inclusive discussion of body types (Silk et al., 2011; Domoff et al., 2012; Gilbert, 2020). In addition, several studies have also argued that aspects of the show increase weight bias and stigma against overweight people (Thomas et al., 2007; Sender, & Sullivan, 2008; Yoo, 2013).

Despite this controversy, authorised local versions of *The Biggest Loser* have been made in around thirty countries worldwide (Endemol Shine Distribution, 2020), and have enjoyed varying degrees of success. In the European context, versions of the show have been particularly popular in Germany (11 seasons), Sweden (9 seasons), and Ukraine (9 seasons), and there have been also special celebrity-based versions broadcast in Sweden and in Finland. However, the programme has been less popular in countries such as Poland, Hungary, and Romania, where just one season has been broadcast to date.

Translating titles

As Bobadilla-Pérez (2007, p. 117) states, the title of a given work represents the "most imprecise, capricious and subjective component"; nonetheless, however, titles contain essential and valuable information. In a source language, the title can be divided up into either having a nominal, thematic, or abstract function. As such, translators recontextualise the title, thereby aiming to render the same effect in the target culture as in the source language. In doing so, as Doyle (1989) illustrates, the translator can either use three main strategies – the literal, the near-literal (word by word), or the liberal 'free translation' approach, where the translator has greater liberty in selecting a translation that is felt to be appropriate to a given context. For Nord (1995), the translation of titles depends on three major functions (the issue that a title is distinctive, phatic, and metatextual), as well as three secondary ones (descriptive/referential, expressive, and appellative). In addition, as Bobadilla-Pérez (2007) notes, the translation choice of the titles of films (and by extension, television programmes) can also essentially commercial, especially in this day and age where merchandise and spin-off material can be financially lucrative, as well as associated issues involving copyright and intellectual property.

Regarding *The Biggest Loser*, a key translation issue is represented by the multiplicity of interpretations that the original title conveys to the native English speaker. Taking the noun 'loser', the Cambridge Dictionary lists several definitions for the word, including not only a person who "does not win a game or competition", but also someone "who is always unsuccessful at everything they do" or even, offensively, "a person that you have no respect for" (Cambridge English Dictionary, 2020). As also highlighted by Díaz-Pérez (2014) in his study of translating puns in Spanish film titles, the translator's task in dealing with this wordplay is manifold and presents a variety of challenges. This is especially so given the specific nature of attempting to render these complexities into each local language and culture, as well as accounting for the preferences and subtleties of the target audience.

Methodology

Building on the overview outlined in the previous two sections, it was decided to base the current exploratory study on three main research questions:

i. Has the title been translated into the local language (fully/in part) and does this correlate with the general English language proficiency of the country concerned?

ii. Are aspects (wordplay/transformation) of the original *The Biggest Loser* title present in the translated version?

iii. Are there any common geographical/linguistic similarities between the versions?

Following careful analysis of the list of approximately 30 countries worldwide where local versions of *The Biggest Loser* had been made, it was decided to limit the scope of the current study. To provide a manageable sample, the decision was made to focus on those

European Union (EU) member states and candidate countries where English is not an official language. In addition to providing a common frame of reference, this was also linked to the researcher's familiarity with a range of European languages and cultures; however, the prime determinant, was the availability of reliable statistics regarding English language proficiency, as required by the first research question. Although there are data from numerous English language proficiency surveys available, the Eurobarometer surveys on Europeans and their languages were chosen owing to the quality of their methodology and large sample size. The surveys included relevant information on all EU member states (European Commission, 2012) as well as on the candidate countries (European Commission, 2006), thus ensuring the veracity of the data obtained.

Regarding the titles of local versions of *The Biggest Loser*, the associated Wikipedia page was used as an initial source (The Biggest Loser, 2020). However, given Wikipedia's collaborative nature, it was also necessary to verify the information featured there through other sources. The issue was complicated by the fact that television programmes focussing on weight loss are popular in many countries, and there are numerous shows, such as *La Báscula* in Spain (Canal Sur, 2020) which have a similar premise but nonetheless are not part of *The Biggest Loser* family of programmes. Thus, it was necessary to conduct further investigation, either by cross-checking information on the websites of the television channels concerned or in local media of the respective countries. However, this was not always straightforward, particularly where local versions of the show were no longer made and had disappeared from the websites of the television channels. In addition, where photographs and video footage were available, this was also utilised in order to confirm that these shows visually and structurally adhered to *The Biggest Loser* concept.

Results

As illustrated in Table 1, fourteen European versions of *The Biggest Loser* were examined. These represented thirteen countries (12 EU member states and 1 candidate country) and thirteen different languages.

Table 1. European versions of *The Biggest Loser* used in this study

Country	Language	Original title (translation)	English proficiency (Eurobarometer)
Croatia (HR)	Croatian	*Život na vagi* (Life on the scale)	49%
Finland (FI)	Finnish	*Suurin pudottaja* (The Biggest Loser)	70%
Germany (DE)	German	*The Biggest Loser Germany*	56%
Hungary (HU)	Hungarian	*A Nagy Fogyás* (The Big Weight Loss)	20%
Latvia (LV)	Latvian	*XXL*	46%
The Netherlands (NL)	Dutch	*The Biggest Loser Holland*	90%
Poland (PL)	Polish	*Co masz do stracenia?* (What do you have to lose?)	33%
Portugal (PT)	Portuguese	*Peso Pesado* (Heavyweight)	27%
Romania (RO)	Romanian	*Marele câştigator* (The Biggest Winner)	31%
Slovakia (SK)	Slovak	*Supertelo* (Superbody); *Najväčší vitaz* (The Biggest Winner)	26%
Slovenia (SI)	Slovenian	*The Biggest Loser Slovenija*	59%
Sweden (SE)	Swedish	*The Biggest Loser Sverige*	86%
Turkey (TR)	Turkish	*Yeni Bir Hayat* (A New Life)	17%

As presented in Table 2, once the data had been collected and analysed, the results were then divided up in accordance with the research questions outlined in the previous section.

Table 2. Outline of strategies adopted when translating the title of *The Biggest Loser*

Retained fully/ partially in English	Near-literal translation	Translation but with inversion of concept	Free translation
(DE) *The Biggest Loser Germany* (56%)	(FI) *The Biggest Loser* (70%)	(RO) *The Biggest Winner* (31%)	(HR) *Life on the scale* (49%)
(NL) *The Biggest Loser Holland* (90%)	(HU): *The Big Weight Loss* (20%)	(SK-2) *The Biggest Winner* (26%)	(LV) *XXL* (46%)
(SI) *The Biggest Loser Slovenija* (59%)			(PL) *What do you have to lose?* (33%)
(SE) *Biggest Loser Sverige* (86%)			(PT) *Heavyweight* (27%)
			(SK-1) *Superbody* (26%)
			(TR) *A New Life* (17%)

As illustrated in Table 2, there was a strong correlation between levels of English proficiency and the decision whether or not to translate the title. In Germany, The Netherlands, Slovenia, and Sweden, where over half the population possesses good English-language skills, the title was retained in that language. Interestingly enough, despite the Eurobarometer data showing high levels of English proficiency in Finland (70%), the title of the local version there was in fact translated

into Finnish. In general terms, though, the most popular translation device was free translation, thus allowing the programme title to be fully localised to the specific market concerned. In Romania and in the most recent Slovak version, the translated version inverted the concept of 'loser' to 'winner', an amendment which dovetails neatly with the second research question.

With regard to the element of wordplay and transformation, the complexity of translating the oxymoronic notion of a loser 'winning', together with the other meanings of the word, has been already outlined. For those countries with high Eurobarometer English scores that retained the English title of the programme (Germany, The Netherlands, Slovenia, and Sweden), it can be argued that the local population is expected to have sufficient language skills to be able to understand and interpret the multiple meanings of the word. In terms of the Finnish, Hungarian, and Polish versions of the title, the focus here is largely on weight loss. With regard to the Romanian, Turkish, and both of the Slovak versions, the emphasis here is primarily on the notion of physical transformation and of being a 'winner'. The titles of the Croatian, Latvian, and Portuguese versions, though, focus on physical size.

Table 3. Translated versions of *The Biggest Loser* arranged by language family

Germanic	Slavonic	Romance	Finno-Ugric
(DE) *The Biggest Loser Germany* (56%)	(HR) *Life on the scale* (49%)	(RO) *The Biggest Winner* (31%)	(FI) *The Biggest Loser* (70%)
(NL) *The Biggest Loser Holland* (90%)	(PL) *What do you have to lose?* (33%)	(PT) *Heavyweight* (27%)	(HU): *The Big Weight Loss* (20%)
(SE) *Biggest Loser Sverige* (86%)	(SI) *The Biggest Loser Slovenija* (59%)		
	(SK-1) *Superbody* (26%)		
	(SK-2) *The Biggest Winner* (26%)		

Source: own elaboration, based on data from The Biggest Loser (2020) and European Commission (2006, 2012).

As outlined in Table 3, there were some interesting results in terms of similarities regarding translation strategies between families of languages. For the versions made for countries where other Germanic languages are spoken (Germany, The Netherlands, and Sweden), the English title was maintained with the addition of the demonym. It could be argued that this is due in part to the high level of general English proficiency, as well as the close cultural and linguistic relationship. Taking into account those Germanic languages spoken outside of the EU, this approach was also espoused by the Icelandic *(Biggest Loser Ísland)* and Norwegian *(Biggest Loser Norge)* versions. For those versions made for Slavonic-speaking countries (Croatia, Poland, Slovakia, with the notable exception of Slovenia), however, there was a tendency to change the title, possibly due to English proficiency being less widespread. A similar translation strategy was also noted in the Slavonic-speaking non-EU countries, with both the Russian (*Взвешенные и счастливые люди,* "Weighted and Happy People")

and Ukrainian (*Зважені та щасливі*, "Weighted and Happy") versions having noticeably different titles to the English version. With regard to the Romance languages, it is perhaps interesting to note that to date no French, Italian, or Spanish version of *The Biggest Loser* has been made. For the Portuguese and Romanian versions, however, it is notable that both of the titles differ considerably from the English original.

Conclusion

In terms of examining the translation strategies made regarding European versions of *The Biggest Loser,* this exploratory study has illustrated that there are indeed common features. As such, there is a general tendency to either retain the original English title, or for the title to be translated freely. The options of near-literal translation or inversion of the concept of losing/winning are less popular. It was also noted that there is a distinct correlation between those countries that retain the English title with a Eurobarometer English language proficiency score of above 50%.

Regarding the wordplay inherent in the title, which is by its very nature challenging to translate, most versions chose to focus on other relevant aspects. These included the notion of physical transformation or the participants' size. Distinct geographical and linguistic similarities were also noted; for those countries where Germanic languages are spoken, it was observed that the English title was retained, whereas other countries displayed a preference for the title to be translated into their own languages.

Building on these preliminary conclusions, it is important to note that the current project is very much an exploratory study. As such, it is planned to conduct further comparative research on the topic. The aim, therefore, is to generate more widespread data on the translation strategies utilised for the titles of reality television programmes, with the intention of examining whether these findings are representative of a wider trend in the European context.

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