

The League of Extraordinary Subtitles: Bad Translations Offer Meta Fun

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“Got it into your head to stuff from the dark continent.” Got it?

On my visits home to Bangladesh from New York, I catch up on my movie-watching — exploring the local market of pirated films. Clone DVDs are increasingly sophisticated, with sleek, realistic packaging. One Dhaka friend tells me, “I look up movies on Amazon.com and then I go buy them at Rifles Square market.”

However, this sophistication does not extend to the closed-caption subtitles. Since the clones are illegal dubs of promotional copies, there are no **subtitles** to copy. This gap has been filled by enterprising Asian cloners who have started inserting their own subtitles. One Chinese outfit hires university graduates to watch the films and type in subtitles. These efforts have often resulted in hilarious and unintentionally subversive results. The Sean Connery blockbuster *The League Of Extraordinary Gentlemen (LXG)* provides a case in point.



The film is an adaptation of an Alan Moore graphic novel, which focuses on a “superhero” team of fictional heroes, brought together to fight an evil genius. The team includes Allan Quatermain (H. Rider Haggard’s swashbuckling hero), Captain Nemo (Jules Verne), Mina Harker (Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*), Invisible Man (H. G. Wells), Dorian Gray (Oscar Wilde), and all-American Tom Sawyer (Mark Twain). The initial meetings of our intrepid heroes prove to be incredibly distracting. The spoken dialogue tells one story — the closed-caption subtitles provide a completely different, and often more interesting, subtext.

The errors in subtitles start off as banal mistakes. A drunken sot’s remark to a visitor, “And I suppose you’re another traveler, got it in your head to sample the dark continent” becomes the reverse: “And I suppose you aren’t a traveler. Got it into your head to stuff from the dark continent.” Dire predictions of an unstable world, “Baying for blood, it’s a powder keg.” changes to “Being for blood, it’s a powder cake.” The Invisible Man’s jest, “I’m feeling a bit of draft in my nether regions” becomes, “I’m feeling a bit of drafted another agents.” Individual phrases also provide a challenge: “Thief” changes to “faith,” “boon” to “bone,” “sick note” to “sick knot,” “as patriotic” to “the speech” and “prerogative” to “perlocutive.”



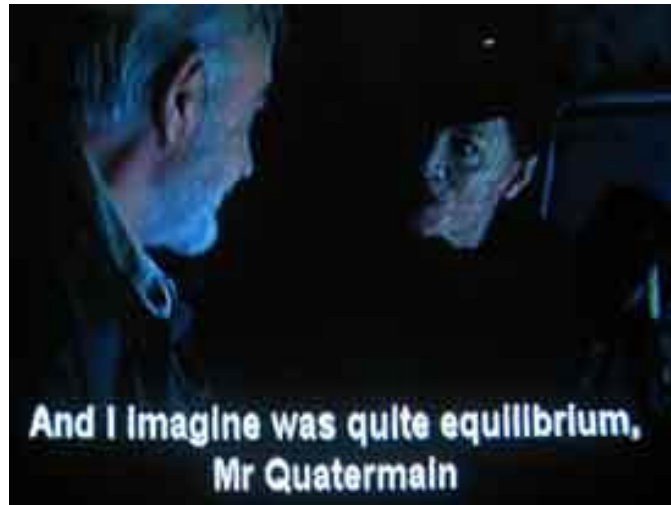
Some sense can still be made of the subtitles, until utterly nonsensical constructions start to appear. “There is great unrest, countries set at each other’s throats” mutates to “That’s glad on rest, countries set each other throat.” “These attacks have every nation clamoring for the very weapons that assail them” changes to “And he attached every nations claiming very weapons to the sierra.” Sean Connery’s guttural growl after a fight, “Wasn’t there another one of these buggers?” becomes “You guys sent another this baggage?” Strangest of all, Quatermain’s boast, “I don’t know whether to regale with how I found King Solomon’s mines,” becomes “I know how to regret you with how I found to kick soloman’s mind.” Of course, “kick” might actually be appropriate, given the racism in old adventure tales.

Sometimes, the Asian subtitle creators look at the action and make a judgment call about what the word may have been. Cultural references are invariably botched in this process. Sean Connery demands his gun by yelling, “Bruce, Matilda!” Here, Matilda is the name of his gun — but this makes no sense to the subtitle-maker, so he changes it to “Bruce, wait for my order.” When Connery is congratulated for making good time to London, he grumbles, “Not as good as Phineas Fogg.” This *Around the World in 80 Days* reference goes over the transcribers’ head, who deduces it must be a reference to the awful English weather we see on-screen. The subtitle then appears: “Not as good as full as fog.” Captain Nemo’s assistant is a *Moby Dick* character who says, “Call me Ishmael.” Baffled by this, the subtitle-writer craftily notes the color of the speaker (he’s white), and substitutes the phrase “Tommy Ishmael.” During a shootout, Connery yells, “Automatic rifles! Who in God’s name has automatic rifles?” His companion replies, “That’s unsporting, probably Belgium.” This mutates into, “That’s unspotting, how embarrassing.”

To give readers a taste of the total viewing experience, I include below a portion of dialogue. The erroneous subtitle appears under each line. In this scene, Allan Quatermain (Connery) is crossing swords with Mina Harker, in a replay of the battle of sexes.

Quatermain: Mrs Harker, I doubt if you measure danger, the way I do!

Subtitle: Mrs. Hacker, I doubt if you measure of danger, the way I do?



Mina: And I imagine you were quite the librarian, Mr. Quatermain...

Subtitle: And I imagine was quite equilibrium, Mr. Quatermain

Mina: ... All those books you must have read just by looking at the covers

Subtitle: The books you must have read me by looking at the covers

Quatermain: I've had women along on past exploits...

Subtitle: I had women along in past days

Quatermain: ...And found them to be, at best... a distraction

Subtitle: And found them to be the best... of a distraction

Mina: Do I distract you?

Quatermain: My dear girl, I've buried two wives, and many lovers...

Subtitle: A day ago, I married 2 wives and many of them...

Quatermain: ... And I'm in no mood for any more of either

Subtitle: And I have no mood for more of idle

For the semioticians, there are layers of double meaning that can be read into the errors. Some errors may be deliberate, thrown in as sly double-entendre and commentary. The vampire Mina Harker is asked if her husband is sick and she replies, "Sick would be a mild understatement," which promptly appears on screen as "Sick would be mild and stagnant." When a campy, overdressed Naseeruddin Shah first appears (as Nemo), Sean Connery gruffly says, "Rumor has it that you're a pirate." The subtitle changes this to "When we had the joke of Pirates." Finally, a visitor's announcement, "I'm a representative of Her Majesty's British Government" is promptly changed to "I'm the representative of His Majesty of the British

Government.” Here, the DVD-copier is defiantly changing genders of Queen Victoria’s fiercely matriarchal rule.

Watching this film was truly an extraordinary experience! Researchers should experiment with other pirated DVDs, finding faulty subtitle executions that might provide similar “meta” experiences.