

LOST IN TRANSLATION

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For *Speak Up* magazine

March 2007

Last month I walked into my neighborhood movie rental store and asked for *Perdido na Tradução*. The guy at the counter drew a blank, so I explained: "You know, the one where Bill Murray goes to Tokyo, and meets that girl from the Woody Allen movie?" That was all it took. He led me to the "staff picks" rack and took down *Encontros e Desencontros*. Ironically, the title of *Lost in Translation* had been lost in translation.

I can list many such examples of twisted titles. See if you remember the Portuguese names for these recent Hollywood hits: *Failure to Launch*, a romantic comedy about a thirty-something man who still lives with his parents; *The Wicker Man*, a suspense thriller about a police officer tormented by the death of a mother and child; and *Over the Hedge*, an animated film about a raccoon that leads his forest friends into the city. If you guessed *Armações do Amor*, *O Sacrifício*, and *Os Sem-Floresta*, you are a true movie buff.

What intrigued me about *Lost in Translation*, and the films mentioned above, is how much an American motion picture title can change when the movie is marketed in Brazil. Not that I imagined studio executives in Hollywood using translation software to come up with Portuguese titles, but who did come up with them? And what guidelines do they follow? I got in touch with Steve Solot, the Senior Vice President for Latin American Operations of the Motion Picture Association.

"Distribution companies usually translate film titles literally," Steve explained. "However, if a title doesn't sound good enough for commercial use, a committee among the company's marketing and sales staff will choose a title after screening the movie. The chosen Portuguese title is then translated back to English and submitted to the home office in Los Angeles – and sometimes to the film director – for approval."

Distribution companies usually translate film titles literally? Had I been focusing on the exceptions? Back at my neighborhood movie rental store I studied the new releases rack. Steve was right. Most Brazilian titles are similar to the American original. Many are translated literally (*O Código Da Vinci*, *16 Quadras*), others aren't translated at all (*Click*, *Miami Vice*), a few gain a subtitle (*Sin City: A Cidade do Pecado*, *Crash: No Limite*), and others have only a word or two translated (*Sr. e Sra. Smith*, *Superman – O Retorno*).

But what about titles like *O Plano Perfeito* (*Inside Man*), which have nothing to do with the original?

I showed one of the boxes to the guy at the counter. "This was called *Scary Movie* in the United States," I said. "Why do you think they called it *Todo Mundo em Pânico* in Brazil?"

"It's a take-off of the thriller *Pânico*," he told me.

"I've never heard of that movie."

"It was called *Scream* in English."

One new release, *Date Movie*, follows in the spirit of *Scary Movie* – except now the joke is on romantic comedies like *Big Fat Greek Wedding* (*Casamento Grego*), *The Wedding Planner* (*O Casamento dos Meus Sonhos*), and *My Best Friend's Wedding* (*O Casamento do Meu Melhor Amigo*). *Date Movie* was released in Brazil as *Uma Comédia Nada Romântica*, and reading down

the credits on the back of the box, I was able to find the name of the distribution company.

An operator at Fox Film do Brasil patched me through to the person in charge of translating the company's new releases: Tito Liberato, director of marketing. I was struck by a coincidence: all my questions had to do with film titles, and the liberties taken in translating them. Tito Liberato. He must be my man.

Tito sounded younger than I had expected. "Fox releases between 25 and 30 films each year," he said. "The team responsible for translating these titles is small – about 15 people from sales, marketing, and other departments."

Tito walked me through the process, pointing out that the title they choose will become a movie's identity in theaters, rental stores, and on TV. "We work on a case-by-case basis, depending on the film, the studio, and even the director. We start by translating the title literally, and we try to stay close to that. But if the literal title won't appeal to the Brazilian audience, we go with something else."

Uma Comédia Nada Romântica is an example of something else. The literal translation of *Date Movie* would be "Filme Sobre Encontros," and that lacks punch. So Tito and his team came up with an alternative and sold it to executives in the United States – executives who don't even speak Portuguese. Did he have to send an e-mail suggesting "A Not-At-All Romantic Comedy"? "Not exactly," Tito said. "We try to put the Portuguese title into context, so English speakers will know what it means to Brazilians."

I began to realize that translating a movie title is as much about culture as it is about language. Let's return to *Failure to Launch*, *The Wicker Man*, and *Over the Hedge*. Remember that in Brazil these titles were translated as *Armações do Amor*, *O Sacrifício*, and *Os Sem-Floresta*. In Portugal, however, the translations were *Como Despachar um Encalhado*, *O Escolhido*, and *Pulando a Cerca*. As you can see, a raccoon movie named after MST is only funny on one side of the Atlantic...

This month Fox Film do Brasil is releasing another parody: *Epic Movie*. The film spoofs recent blockbusters like *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (*A Fantástica Fábrica de Chocolate*), *X-Men* (*X-Men*), and *The Pirates of the Caribbean* (*Piratas do Caribe*). What is the best translation of the title? "Filme Épico"? "Um Drama Nada Dramático"? Tito and his team came up with *Deu a Louca em Hollywood*. That's pretty good, if you ask me. But I bet the studio executives in Hollywood thought *They've lost their minds in Brazil* when they approved that one.

What's In a Name?

A good title captures the spirit of a movie in as few words as possible. Take for example the comedy *Austin Powers, International Man of Mystery*, which was released in 1997. This movie is a James Bond parody, starring Mike Myers as a 1960s playboy and sometime spy who travels thirty years into the future to battle his nemesis Dr. Evil. In Brazil the title was translated to *Austin Powers: 000 – Um Agente Nada Secreto*.

The movie's 1999 sequel, *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*, was named after a real James Bond film: *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977). However, "Loved" was replaced with "Shagged," which is Austin Powers slang for (according to the Miriam-Webster dictionary) "to run after with intent to copulate." The title makes you laugh, even before you've seen the movie. This is a challenge to translate, but New Line Cinema got it right with *Austin Powers – O Agente Bond Cama*.

The third film in the series was *Austin Powers in Goldmember* (2002). This title is also a parody of a former James Bond film: *Goldfinger* (1964). Replacing "-finger" with "-member" creates a sexual pun. So how do you keep the humor in Portuguese, while still making reference to 007? *Austin Powers – O Homem do Membro de Ouro* is a good try, but doesn't capture the spirit of the English original.

Movie Titles: Test Yourself

Match these American films with their corresponding Brazilian release titles.

- 1) *Wag the Dog* (2003)
- 2) *The Pacifier*(2005)
- 3) *RV*(2006)
- 4) *Walk the Line* (2005)
- 5) *Dumb and Dumber* (1994)
- 6) *Meet the Parents* (2000)
- 7) *Shallow Hal* (2001)
- 8) *Final Destination*(2000)
- 9) *The Stepford Wives* (2004)
- 10) *Prime* (2005)
- 11) *Home on the Range*(2004)
- 12) *Analyze This*(1999)
- 13) *The Sweetest Thing* (2002)
- 14) *Phone Booth* (2003)
- 15) *Out of Time*(2003)

- A) *Por um Triz*
- B) *Johnny e June*
- C) *Máfia no Divã*
- D) *Ferías no Trailer*
- E) *O Amor É Cego*
- F) *Premonição*
- G) *Mulheres Perfeitas*
- H) *Tudo para Ficar com Ele*
- I) *Mera Coincidência*
- J) *Nem Que a Vaca Tussa*
- K) *Debi & Lóide*
- L) *Operação Babá*
- M) *Terapia do Amor*
- N) *Por um Fio*
- O) *Entrando numa Fria*

Answers: 1-I / 2-L / 3-D / 4-B / 5-K / 6-O / 7-E / 8-F / 9-G / 10-M / 11-J / 12-C / 13-H / 14-N / 15-A