

Constraints in Screen Translation: The Socio-Cultural Dimensions of Dubbing and Subtitling

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Whether domesticating or foreignising in its approach, any form of audiovisual translation ultimately plays a unique role in developing both national identities and national stereotypes. The transmission of cultural values in screen translation has received very little attention in the literature and remains one of the most pressing areas of research in translation studies. (Mona Baker and Braño Hochel 1997:76) The term audiovisual translation refers to both the translation of the distribution format and its contents. Even though the technical responsibilities of audiovisual translators may become limited, their creative and linguistic abilities, as well as their capacity to match words with both images and sounds continue to be tested. The present paper reflects the pace and breadth of the linguistic and cultural challenges that the translators encounter while translating, subtitling and dubbing films.

Keywords: Screen translation, dubbing, subtitling, audio-visual medium

In the current media scenario, there is an ongoing transfer of power from the media owners to the distributors and professionals who manipulate the multiple codes of the digital era. Translators are a part of this group but do not yet realize what this implies or recognize its full effects. As a result, this field remains fragmented with a vision limited to certain aspects and short term goals. The concept of translation is based on the notion that a translation is a retextualization of a text textualized previously in another language. The term audiovisual translation refers to both the translation of the distribution format and its contents. The assessment of the quality of a translation – and translation, in this context, refers to the linguistic rendering of a text into another language – is further complicated in the case of subtitling when the translator has to grapple with the many constraints and few opportunities of the audiovisual medium.

We live in a society which is in constant evolution and in this sense the spectacular development of technology has an unavoidable impact on the society. Hence it is necessary to view translation from a more flexible and heterogeneous perspective, one which allows for a broad range of empirical realities and which is able to subsume new and potential translation activities within its boundaries. Screen translation is currently the preferred term used for the translation of a wide variety

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of audiovisual texts displayed on one kind of screen or another. While it is normally associated with subtitling and lip-synchs dubbing of audio visual material for television and cinema its range is actually much greater, covering the translation of TV programmes, films, videos, DVDs, operas and plays. This study investigates the problems that translators tend to face in the subtitling and dubbing of language films and television programmes into any other language.

In the light of an examination of the generic features of audiovisual translation and of the particular cultural constraints inherent in translation for audiences, it is apparent that certain elements of translation theory can be useful in overcoming the technical and cultural barriers identified. This proposition is tested through analysis of the translation of three feature films and an animation series *shrek* that have been subtitled and dubbed from one language to the other, with a particular focus on the translation of dialect, swear words, and humor. Technical, linguistic and cultural issues constitute a challenge to the translators who need to deal with the limitations on screen such as space, time, lip and character synchronizations and the problem of culture which restricts them when they want to translate taboo expressions. This results in a loss, either partial or complete, of the source film's message.

Even for those with an adequate command of the foreign language, every audio visual product brings with it a wide range of additional obstacles to comprehension: dialectal and sociolectal variation, lack of access to explanatory feedback, external environmental sound level and overlapping speech making translation of the product crucial for the majority of the users. The typologies established by Gambier (1996), Luyken (1991) and Diaz Cintas (1999) distinguish as many as ten types of multilingual transfers in the field of audio visual communication. Here we will focus on dubbing, voice over and more particularly subtitling.

Each country cultivates a different tradition of translating films and subscribes to one of the two major modes: dubbing and subtitling as far as cinema translation is concerned, or sometimes to a third, minor, mode-voiceover-in the case of television translation. The decision as to which film translation mode to choose is by no means arbitrary and stems from several factors, such as historical circumstances, traditions, the technique to which the audience is accustomed, the cost, as well as on the position of both the target and the source cultures in an international context. The two major types of film translation: dubbing and subtitling interferes with the original text to a different extent. On the one hand, dubbing is known to be the method that modifies the source text to a large extent and thus makes it familiar to the target audience through domestication. It is the methods in which the foreign dialogue is adjusted to the mouth and movements of the actor in the film and its aim is seen as making the audience feel as if they were listening to actors actually speaking the target language. On the other hand, subtitling, i.e. supplying a translation of the spoken source language dialogue into the target language in the form of synchronized captions, usually at the bottom of the screen, is the form that alters the source text to the least possible extent and enables the target audience to experience the foreign and be aware of its 'foreignness' at all times.

Subtitling

Subtitling may be defined as a translation practice that consists of presenting a written text, generally on the lower part of the screen, that endeavors to recount the original dialogue of the speakers, as well as the discursive elements that appear in the image (letters, inserts, graffiti, inscriptions, placards, and the like), and the information that is contained on the soundtrack (songs, voices off). Dubbing in movies is a form of revoicing that involves recording voices that do not belong to the on-screen actors. It is speaking in a language different from that of the source text and ideally in synch with the film image. Dubbing can also refer more generally to adding or replacing sound effects or spoken lines by the source actors themselves in the language of the film's production. While this latter form of

revoicing is present in virtually all modern films, it is often called “looping” to distinguish it from dubbing as language translation. Another form of revoicing is the “voice-over,” in which a non synchronous voice that does not replace the source text and language is added to the sound track but does not replace the source text and language. Voice-over is but a relatively minor mode compared to dubbing and subtitling.

Subtitles (or captions, as they are also termed) can be of two types – they can be the translation of the text of the film/TV show or can be the written text of the oral one in the same language. The latter form of subtitles, i.e. English subtitles for English films/TV shows is quite common on TV channels in India. The reason for this perhaps could be that English is not the first language of Indians and many people might have difficulty in following the dialogue of the movie or the show. Channels like Star movies, HBO, Zee Studio and Star World in India have recently resorted to English subtitles for movies and other entertainment shows. However, channels like BBC in the UK also give viewers the choice to have English subtitles of programmes they are watching, from news bulletins to entertainment shows.

Subtitling, like voice-over, presents the translated and source languages simultaneously, but it transforms speech into writing without altering the source sound track. Elimination, rendering and simplification are the principle operation that the translator must carry out in order to obtain effective subtitles. Subtitling may be either intralingual or interlingual. In the former, the written text that appears over the image is that of the source language. This kind of subtitling, for viewers who are deaf and hard-of-hearing, is often called captioning and it is in widespread use in television broadcasting. Interlingual subtitling translates the source language into the target language (or languages) in the form of one or more lines of synchronized written text. These verbal messages may include not only speech, such as dialogue, commentary, and song lyrics, but also displays, such as written signs and newspaper headlines. Subtitles usually appear at the bottom of the screen, though their placement may vary among language groups. In bilingual subtitling countries such as Belgium, Finland, and Israel, film subtitles are often present in both languages. Despite the increasing popularity of simple voice-overs and subtitling, the process of dubbing and lip synchronization is still one of the preferred methods to watch video content in another language.

Two adaptation methods are clearly favourite when foreign-language television programmes are made available to a domestic market: subtitling and lip-sync dubbing (Kilborn, 1993). There are three other adaptation methods that are used on a more or less regular basis, but these methods are applied only in a limited group of specific programme types: off-screen narration in programmes in which off-screen comments were also provided in the original language; voiceover in news programmes; and intertitles in documentaries and educational programmes that focus on pictorial information.

The choice to dub foreign television programmes is mainly defended with the argument that dubbed programmes are easy to follow because viewers do not have to read while viewing. In the camp of the subtitlers, on the other hand, there is annoyance about the imperfect lip-synchronicity in dubbed programmes, and subtitling is defended with the argument that the original voices of the actors are left intact.

For several reasons, adaptation through subtitling or dubbing can have consequences for the transfer of information. First, it is not possible with either method to translate the original text literally. With subtitling the information often has to be condensed: not all of the words that are said fit into the subtitles. Dubbing too has a limitation: the texts have to fulfil the condition that they must seem to be spoken by the person in the picture. Second, with dubbing the original soundtrack is removed, whereas with subtitling part of the picture is ‘covered’ with text. Finally, viewers do have to process the adapted information in different ways: in the case of dubbed programmes they have to listen to the information and in the case of subtitled programmes they have to read it.

A subtitled movie can be processed well by viewers. Most likely, the necessary condensation involved in the adaptation of spoken text to subtitles does not lead to information loss and subtitles do not distract the viewer's attention from the picture. Even when the sound of the television is drowned out by other noises in the room, subtitled programmes can still be followed. Because reading is faster than listening, information processing while watching subtitled programmes is also efficient. Dubbed programmes too can be processed well by viewers. Listening to spoken texts is evidently not very demanding mentally, because viewers do not need to be reading at the same time. Especially when watching television is a secondary activity, dubbed programmes are easy to follow. Because with dubbing the original soundtrack is totally removed, dialogues can be adapted easily, with the disadvantage that viewers are more vulnerable to manipulation and censorship.

An advantage of subtitling is that a subtitled programme is more 'real' and more closely resembles the original programme than a dubbed programme, because actors, presenters, etc. are heard with their own voices (Luyken et al., 1991). Dubbing is criticized because popular 'voiceactors' participate in so many programmes that viewers may hear the same familiar voices again and again, even when they belong to very different characters in very different television programmes (Groenewold, 1986). As the original voices of the actors cannot be heard, an important part of the acting performance is lost. With non-fiction, such as news programmes, when the original voice is dubbed over, the non-verbal part of the paralinguistic information is lost. The tone in which a subject answers a question, or a hesitation at a certain moment, might be very important to the viewer's interpretation.

An aesthetic argument against subtitling is that the artistic unity of picture and sound is lost when the dialogue is presented through onscreen texts. According to Teunissen, subtitling causes an 'attention split' which negates the audiovisual power of the medium. Presentation of the translation through dubbing stays within the boundaries of the medium, whereas subtitling leads to an improper addition to the images. This addition harms the continuity of the medium and turns it into a kind of cartoon.

Subtitlers too are sometimes compelled to use less than optimal translations. Most of these adjustments thus relate to the necessity of condensing the original text. A common solution is to change the compound past tense used in the original dialogue into the simple past tense in the subtitle. For example, 'I did that' is used instead of 'I have done that'. Viewers may, on the other hand, experience dubbed programmes as unnatural, if the synchronicity between lip movements and sound leaves much to be desired. This is a serious problem, because a perfect lip-synchronization is impossible to achieve.

However, dubbed programmes have the advantage that no texts are projected over the pictures. Dubbing therefore maintains the unity of picture and sound. Another advantage is that viewers may experience dubbed programmes as familiar, because they hear their own language. Disadvantages are that the voices of the original actors cannot be heard and that viewers may experience unnaturalness when the lip-synchronicity is inadequate. In subtitled programmes, on the other hand, the original voices can be heard, but the screen is 'polluted' with lines of texts.

The characteristic of 'modality' pertains to the fact that viewers read texts when they are watching subtitled television programmes, whereas they listen to texts while watching dubbed programmes. 'Omission' with regard to subtitling concerns covering up part of the picture, whereas with dubbing the original soundtrack is deleted. The third characteristic, 'conversion', pertains to the most distinctive restriction in the way in which the translation has to be adapted to form an 'organic unity' with the original components that stay intact (Luyken et al., 1991): condensation in the case of subtitling and lip-synchronicity in the case of dubbing.

The national preferences for subtitled or dubbed films stem from several factors, including historical and political circumstances, traditions and industries, costs, the form to which audiences are

accustomed, and the generic and artistic standing of the films themselves. Before these can be considered, it is necessary to address the historical circumstances that gave rise to dubbing and subtitling and to their emergence as the preferred forms of verbal translation in film. Silent films presented few problems for language transfer, though they still entailed translation for international audiences. While silent films were well suited to consumption in a variety of cultural contexts, Intertitles were not simply translated from source to target languages but creatively adapted to cater to diverse national and language groups: the names of characters, settings and plot developments, and other cultural references were altered as necessary in order to make the films internationally understandable for different national audiences. By 1927, the intertitles of Hollywood films were routinely translated into as many as thirty-six languages.

Dubbing

With the sound film, it was no longer possible simply to replace intertitles. Subtitling and dubbing have been in use since 1929, but when the first American sound films reached Europe they did not immediately become the preferred solutions to the new problem of sound film translation. Instead, multilingual productions or multiple language versions (MLVs) experienced a period of ascendancy during that period. Their lack of profitability, inability to meet generic requirements across cultures, and the perception that they were purely commercial products led to a precipitous decline in MLVs.

In Western Europe, dubbing emerged in the early 1930s as the standard language transfer in France, Italy, Germany, and Spain (sometimes referred to as the FIGS group). In France, the supremacy of dubbing derives from the nation's cultural mission to preserve and protect the French language in the face of foreign (especially American) influence, and the prevalence of French as the *lingua franca* for a populace accustomed to hearing it in its own films. For the other countries of the FIGS group, culture and political ideology were determining causes. Italy, Germany, and Spain, all of which faced cultural boycotts in the mid-1930s and were ruled by fascist governments, only allowed dubbed versions of foreign films. The dictators of these countries understood how hearing one's own language served to confirm its importance and reinforce a sense of national identity and autonomy. In Italy, especially—where most people, including the filmmakers themselves, spoke dialect rather than the official Tuscan—dubbing forged the synthetic unity of a shared national language. As early as 1929, Benito Mussolini's government decreed that all films projected on Italian screens must have an Italian-language sound track regardless of where it was produced.

Films are polysemiotic, or make use of multiple channels to communicate with the viewer, unlike the monosemiotic medium of a book that is unillustrated. The issues thus that are associated with audiovisual translation are different from the ones we encounter in the case of written interlingual translation. What get translated here are the dialogues of the film, which constitute only a part of the film as a whole. Gottlieb identifies four channels that are generally used by film and television:

- The verbal auditory channel, including dialogue, background voice and sometimes lyrics
- The non-verbal auditory channel, including music, natural sound and sound effects
- The verbal visual channel, including superimposed titles and written signs on the screen, and
- The non-verbal visual channel including picture composition and flow

The translator of the film has to concentrate only on the verbal visual channel. It must be understood that the viewer, who is watching the film and also reading the subtitles, actually has a divided attention. The reception and appreciation of the film will be different, in that the film is also

being read as opposed to just being seen. In translation, the subtitler's focus is not just on the words and sentences of the text, but on its effect as a whole. This pragmatic dimension leaves the subtitler free to take certain linguistic liberties, bearing in mind that each subtitle must be phrased and cued as part of a larger poly semiotic whole aimed at an unconstrained audience reception.

When seen from a purely commercial angle, it is of immense benefit to the Hollywood producers if their films can be appreciated by a wider audience, for whom these films need to be translated or dubbed into an Indian language. So we have seen blockbusters like *Titanic*, *Jurassic Park*, *Spiderman* etc in Hindi, Tamil, or Malayalam run to packed houses for weeks on end. The awkwardness or sometimes the downright comical effect of listening to *Spiderman* in Malayalam referring to his aunt May as 'ammaayi' does not seem to dissuade the avid movie watcher in India. What is going on here is translation at all levels – interlingual as well as intercultural. While interlingual transfer is possible in the case of translation of a film, the intercultural aspect is more problematic. For example, the language of *Spiderman* can be translated into Hindi, but the cultural milieu cannot be translated into India. So we have a strange case of translation which is oriented to the target language but not to target culture.

If you watch '*John Carter*' you may notice a very bizarre occurrence. It is something that might have killed your experience of the movie, if you can't read subtitles. In the scenes where the character of John Carter is transported to Mars and encounters the alien race for the first time, you can hear the Martians speaking in an alien language that the character is unable to understand. You would think that you as the audience aren't supposed to understand it as well, but then you notice something – there are Arabic subtitles at the bottom of the screen appearing with whatever gibberish they speak. You also notice that the dialogue sequences run way too long for something that's meant to be gibberish. You look down and see Arabic subtitles perfectly in sync with character names and everything. You begin to wonder whether these are actual movie dialogues that you're supposed to understand but are unable to. And you would be right. An emotional and impactful moment in the film that makes you wish you could read Martian or Arabic.

The same is the experience when we watch the classic silent movie *Battleship Potemkin* in which we find great difficulty in understanding the major chunk of the movie since it is not explained with enough subtitles or intertitles. There are many instances where the viewer may look for the intertitle or the subtitle to understand the situation like the introduction of a character, reason for his arrival and exiting, sudden change of scenes etc. In the absence of the subtitles the movies will have to be watched twice or thrice to really make out the scenes especially in a foreign set up and culture.

Way back in 2009, when '*Avatar*' was released in IMAX 3D this exact issue persisted. The Na'vi dialogue sequences are extremely important to the movie and impactful during the finale, but unless you have the subtitle you wouldn't get a single word from them. These could very well be important plot points of the movie, without which the entire movie could make a lot less sense to you and could hurt your experience.

Whereas *Eega* (English: Housefly) is a Telugu, fantasy film written and directed by Telugu director S S Rajamouli, released simultaneously in Tamil as *Naan Ee* and the Telugu version of the film was also dubbed into Malayalam as *Eecha* and is to be dubbed into Hindi in 3-D as *Makkhi*. The film's Telugu and Tamil version along with a dubbed Malayalam version was released with over 1200 prints. Upon release, it received rave review and was an unusual and overwhelming success. The film has also earned a place as one of the all time best earners in overseas markets. It shows that a dubbed movie is more welcome in any other language when it is dubbed in sync with the target language and culture. The same kind of success in dubbing of Telugu movie to Malayalam can be seen in movies like *Arya*, *Krishna* and *Simhakutty*.

There is one more observation which concerns the animated series Shrek in particular. It is quite probable that the fact that almost half of the humorous elements in this animated film belong to the category of visual and non-marked is not accidental. Since these elements present fewer problems in transfer than other humorous elements, we could risk the statement that their use was intentional, with the aim to make the humor of the film internationally available. This leaves us just one step away from saying that part of the translation, understood as facilitating the understanding of a given product, begins at the time of creating the script.

Indian directors who have roots in different languages have been known to make the same film in two different languages simultaneously. The Tamil director Mani Ratnam is an example in making films of multiple versions. His film *Ravan* had a Hindi version and a Tamil version. Both had the same story, screenplay and dialogue but had different actors in the two versions. His film *Yuva* in Hindi was *Ayudha Ezhuthu* in Tamil and had a completely different set of actors. The Hindi film cannot be called the dubbed version of the Tamil and neither is it a completely original film. Since it is made by the same filmmaker and based on the same story and screenplay, it is difficult to pinpoint the original and the remake. One can only conjecture that the original is Tamil since Mani Ratnam's first language is Tamil.

Directors like Priyadarshan recreate Malayalam films in Hindi. Some of them are creations of other directors, while some are his own. Since India has overlapping linguistic territories, the same film can have one or more languages. Similarly, it is common to have liberal usage of Punjabi in Hindi films. This is not translated as it is assumed that people who are fluent in Hindi would know a bit of Punjabi as well. This is also true of closely related linguistic communities like Tamil and Malayalam. However the film resorts to subtitles, when a character has to resort to a language that might not be popularly known. The terrorist's speech in the Tamil film *Roja* had Tamil subtitles, because the speech was crucial to the understanding of the film and the director had to make sure that it was understood by the majority of viewers.

Screen Translation

Though translations in films are being carried out since the development of cinema how seriously it is being looked into is what is to be thought over. Nowadays movies are having an international market space and good movies are watched and appraised all over the world. But the problem is with the careless translation which hampers the worth and quality of the movie. As much as in books it is necessary to capture the essence of the comedy, thread and the background in a movie which otherwise would seem to be a flop. Subtitling of Malayalam movies like *Pazassiraja*, *Elavankodu Desam* etc may sell the movie internationally but to be judged as a good movie it has to overcome in translating the cultural barriers. The cultural elements comprehensible to the indigenous viewers should be put through clearly so that translation becomes not only the medium of understanding another language but also learning the cultural background of another country.

The translators of screen texts are literally and metaphorically invisible, as they are never acknowledged in the credits of a film. Translation studies specialists also have not considered them seriously. However, it can be seen that they are undertaking a complex translation process that, if not done carefully, can jeopardize a project that has crores of rupees invested in it. These translators are completely target oriented and will have to know the target language and culture very well. This is more so because a film script consists almost entirely of everyday conversation that is nonliterary. It will have slang and swear words, and expressions that are unique to a particular speech community. The songs in Indian movies pose challenges of a different sort.

The screen translator, then, is faced with challenges that a literary translator is not. The translation that he provides has to capture the essence of the original. She has the freedom to take a

few liberties with the original but not to a great extent. This very freedom calls for a wide-ranging knowledge of the target language with all its linguistic peculiarities and turns of expression. Only a translator with this sort of background can be creative in her use of the translator's freedom.

Thus the translators have significant scope for improving the quality of their output, especially by adopting a more functional translation approach that can help them successfully deal with the difficulties inherent in this type of translation and make the translated dialogue have a similar effect on the target audience as that which the source text has on its audience. Effective subtitling thus requires recognition of the constraints of the media and an approach clearly centered on the audience.

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