

FILM SUBTITLING: A CHALLENGE FOR THE TRANSLATOR

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The 20th century has been called the age of translation and in a world that is rapidly growing smaller, international communication across cultures and even between the remotest corners of the earth is gradually being taken for granted. This of course includes overcoming language barriers and cultural differences. The world today with its rapid exchange of information would be unthinkable without translation.

Nevertheless, many people are often unaware that they are dealing with a translation, mainly because texts that are destined for mass readership are frequently translated in such a way as to let the reader of, for example, popular fiction, or the viewer of the latest episode of *Falcon Crest*, read the novel or watch the programme as if the original had been written in their own language; the «intrusion» of the translation is kept to a minimum.

With subtitled films, however, this is not the case. The text that the viewer reads at the bottom of the screen is clearly a translation, and the film characters speaking in their own language constantly remind us that we are dealing with something foreign, something we do not understand and that has to be translated for us.

There is a joke about subtitling where the character on screen says a long sentence, and the subtitle reads «No». The next intervention is equally long and its subtitle reads «Yes». In fact the feeling that «they do not translate what is being said» can be considered as one of the reasons why the public in some countries is loath to accept subtitling and prefers dubbing.

But our intention here is not to discuss the difficulties that the viewer may encounter when watching a subtitled film, difficulties that the translator must, of course, be aware of, but to consider the challenge that writing those subtitles represents for the translator.

Subtitling differs in many ways from other types of translation, and indeed is perhaps better described as a process of adaptation. Translation, in the strict sense of the term, represents only one aspect of that process. It is the technical and contextual constraints under which the translator works that oblige him to adapt the script of the film (which is, in most cases, dialogue) rather than simply translate it as it stands.

We are going to examine what we consider to be the major constraints faced by the translator, although not, by any means, the only difficulties to be confronted.

Firstly, it should be pointed out that when we refer to subtitles, we are referring to a maximum of two lines per frame, with no more than 33, or in some cases 40, typewriter spaces per line, shown for between two and four seconds, depending on the speed of the sound-track dialogue. These factors are obviously going to give rise to a certain reduction of the source text (ST), as the translator has to condense the message to fit in with these physical limitations.

A second problem is that the translator is working from the spoken to the written medium. This presents obvious difficulties in representing various aspects of spoken language, such as non-standard dialects and colloquialisms, in written form, and also in allowing for the fact that reading comprehension is a longer process for the audience than aural comprehension.

Let us look first at the process of discourse condensation, made necessary by the physical constraints of subtitles.

Translators who work with subtitles learn how to economise on language, how not only to translate what is being said, but to translate what is being said in such a way that the viewer can both read it and watch it at the same time. Mason claims¹ that it is not, of course, the subtitler's task even to attempt to represent all of the linguistically encoded meaning in the ST. Subtitles are intended to be a summary of ST discourse and meaning is to be retrieved by a process of matching this summary with visual perception of the action on screen.

The translator is thereby presented with a tremendous challenge: the selection of the source dialogue material that he needs to transfer into the target language (TL) in order to preserve text cohesion. That is, he needs to preserve the main content items of the film despite the enforced reduction of the length of the SL text. In general, two main strategies are used to accomplish this; the reduction of linguistic redundancy to a minimum and the omission of certain content items which are not essential for understanding the plot.

We have already mentioned that, in the subtitling of films, we are dealing mostly with dialogue. Stubbs² affirms that much talk has less to do with expressing propositional content than with structuring, repeating, emphasizing, mitigating and generally «padding».

Let us illustrate how some of this «padding» is stripped away in the preparation of the subtitles. The examples are taken from *The Prince of Tides* in its version with Spanish subtitles.

Group One

Original version dialogue
(my transcription)

Spanish subtitles
(as they appear on screen)

1.1. Work it out, girls, work it out.

*Arregladlo vosotras.
¿Qué te he dicho de llorar en esta casa?*

¹ R. Kölmel and J. Payne (eds.): *Babel: the cultural and linguistic barriers between Nations*, Aberdeen, Univ. Press, 1989, 18.

² M. Stubbs: *Discourse Analysis: The Sociolinguistic Analysis of Natural Language*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1983, 178.

- 1.2. What did I tell you about crying? What did I tell you about crying in this house?

In this first group of examples, we can see that repetition has been eliminated, and while some emphatic force may have been lost, this is minimal and does not affect the viewer's understanding of the dialogue.

Group Two

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| 2.1. We found a silent soothing world where there was no pain. | <i>Descubrimos un mundo silencioso donde no existía el dolor.</i> |
| 2.2. Stay away from boys because they are all disgusting self-indulgent beasts. | <i>Alejaos de los chicos porque son todos unos asquerosos monstruos.</i> |
| 2.3. I need a stiff drink for that conversation. | <i>Necesito una copa para eso.</i> |
| 2.4. I'm going to ask you a serious question and I want you to answer with brutal honesty. | <i>Os haré una pregunta seria y quiero una respuesta sincera.</i> |

The second group illustrates a tendency to suppress adjectives which are considered redundant (i.e. giving information that is not necessary for the text to be understood) either because more than one adjective is used to qualify a particular noun, or because the adjective's contribution to the text does not, in the translator's view, justify its inclusion in the subtitle.

These examples show that while the viewer is still able to follow the dialogue and understand the film, such omissions inevitably make the subtitled version shallower and simpler – some of the richness of the original script is lost. Examples 2.3. and 2.4., for instance, are taken from the opening scenes of the film, where we are being shown something of the personality of the main character, Tom Wingo, the Prince of Tides. In fact, the conversation that he claims to need a stiff drink for is with his wife about their relationship, and the serious question is asking his daughters who the greatest human being on this earth is. With the suppression of «stiff» and «brutal» we lose some of the irony and cynicism of the interlocutor's comments, and therefore the impression of the character received by the viewer of the subtitled version is somewhat weaker than that received by the viewer of the original.

Group Three

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| 3.1. Hey well honey, it's tough work being a saint. | <i>Es duro ser una santa.</i> |
| 3.2. Oh no! Well, you know what to do with that. Put it in the sink. | <i>Ya sabes qué hacer. Échalo en el fregadero.</i> |
| 3.3. Do you know that this is the first time that you have touched me in weeks? | <i>Ésta es la primera vez que me tocas desde hace semanas.</i> |
| 3.4. I'd bring it down to 25. | <i>Baja a 25 mgs.</i> |

This third group of examples brings us into an area where, in our opinion, the significance of what is lost in translation is even greater. Stubbs³ states that the

³ M. Stubbs, *op. cit.*, 147.

illocutionary force of an utterance is overlaid by markers of mitigation or politeness and Mason⁴ maintains that modality and affective meaning are conveyed by the use of all kinds of short expressions which serve to reinforce or attenuate the force of what is being said. The addition of attenuating items such as «well», «perhaps», «you know», etc. can be used to tone down the aggressiveness of an assertion. In the same way, the force of an utterance can be strengthened by the use of «surely», «really», etc.

According to the theory of politeness developed by Brown and Levinson,⁵ a speaker accommodates to his interlocutors by modifying the force of his utterances to suit what he deems to be «polite» or appropriate to the immediate communicative situation. While our limited time and space here does not allow for a meaningful application of the politeness theory to our data, we can show that there is an inevitable but systematic loss of these markers of politeness in subtitling, with the resulting loss of information for the viewer.

Labov and Fanshel⁶ claim that if interaction is, as it were, stripped to its logical and semantic content, it may appear much more aggressive than the original and this is the case in example 3.1. Mrs Wingo, a doctor, has arrived home from work and says that she has had «one of those days». The example is Tom's response to this statement, and the loss of the attenuating items «Hey well» and the term of endearment «honey» make his reply more direct and aggressive, a statement of fact rather than an attempt to make his wife smile and relax a little.

In 3.2., one of the daughters has informed her mother that Tom has lit a cigarette when he has supposedly given up smoking. Her subtitled response is more brusque and direct, and excludes her expression of disappointment or dismay, «Oh no!».

Example 3.3. occurs during a conversation between Mr and Mrs Wingo about their marital problems. They are walking along the beach and Tom puts his arm around his wife. Her question is an invitation to open up the discussion, an opportunity for Tom to claim that he had not, in fact, realised how long it was since they had had any physical contact. The subtitle does not give him that opening, and has been changed from an interrogative sentence to a more forceful statement of fact.

The final example in this group is a statement made in a New York hospital. Tom's sister has made a suicide attempt and is under sedation. Her psychiatrist is recommending a change in the dose of the drug being administered to sedate her. The subtitle is a straightforward, blunt command, whereas the original statement is more subtle, more polite, a recommendation, an opinion. Given that the psychiatrist is not a member of the hospital staff, but is visiting one of her private patients who has been hospitalised, the use of such a direct order in the subtitle gives the impression that she is a more assertive, aggressive person than is the case.

While the examples we have mentioned may, in isolation, seem to have relatively little importance, the cumulative effect of this reduction of politeness features

⁴ R. Kölmel and J. Payne, *op. cit.*, 21.

⁵ P. Brown and S. Levinson: *Politeness*, Cambridge, Univ. Press, 1987.

⁶ W. Labov and D. Fanshel: *Therapeutic Discourse*, New York, Academic Press, 1977, 352-353.

is bound to put across an altered image of the film characters and their attitude to each other.

So far, we have examined the unavoidable omission in subtitling of whatever ST elements are considered to have the least communicative importance. We shall now move on to consider the limitations imposed on the translator by the shift of mode from speech to writing which takes place in the subtitling of a film.

The first point to bear in mind is that reading comprehension takes more time than aural comprehension. For this reason, in the transfer from spoken to written language, the translator must ensure that the language signs, the amount of information given are sufficient to enable the viewer to digest the written message simultaneously with the flow of speech in the film.

From the receptor's point of view, subtitles are in fact a form of simultaneous translation. Although the translator has prepared the captions in advance, the viewer reads them at the moment they appear on the screen, and is given only that one opportunity to grasp the meaning and assimilate it before the flow of events on screen requires the next set of captions to be shown. In connected written dialogue, the reader can move backwards and forwards in the text, in recapitulation and anticipation. Subtitles are a one-time occurrence and the translator must be aware of that and try to maximise the clarity of the information he is relaying. This can be illustrated by the following examples, taken from *The Last Boy Scout* and its Spanish subtitled version.

Group Four

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| 4.1. | You're like a dog with a frisbee | <i>Pareces un perro con un hueso.</i> |
| 4.2. | They're still scraping him off my stucco. | <i>Aún le están despegando de las paredes de mi casa.</i> |

In substituting a translation of «bone» for «frisbee» and «the walls of my house» for «stucco», the translator is standardising or simplifying expressions which might, in the TL version, cause doubt or confusion through lexical difficulty, or simply take up too much of the viewer's restricted time to be assimilated.

While a written message cannot convey all the subtleties of a spoken one, it must be pointed out that some features of spoken expression are received by the TL viewers directly from the ST itself. Emotions such as anger can be perceived through voice volume, facial expression, body movement etc. The visual context often aids the viewer in comprehending and decoding the written message, and in some ways can compensate for any loss of meaning resulting from the change from spoken to written language.

Informal speech constitutes, as we have mentioned, the major part of SL texts that film subtitlers work with. This type of speech contains several prominent characteristics of style, such as the elision of words or parts of words, accepted abbreviations and, above all, the use of slang and colloquialisms. We identify this type of expression with the spoken medium to such an extent that we do not expect to find

them in writing. Nir⁷ confirms that translators he consulted feel that it is difficult to put certain slang expressions into writing, particularly those which are considered «taboo» in formal language (eg vulgarisms and obscenities), and suggests that the translator may feel subject to certain language norms which oblige him to adhere to a linguistic standard that does not permit conspicuous registerial deviations.

There can be little doubt that hearing a film character use a four-letter word would not horrify the average viewer of today, yet such words have a different impact when spelt out in black and white. All this creates another dilemma for the translator, namely to decide the relative importance of the functional relevance of an expression, compared with the dictates of the written medium and its norms. He must weigh the literal and functional relevance of the utterance against the rules of normativeness and acceptability.

The film *The Last Boy Scout* provides a wealth of examples of strong language, a reflection, perhaps, of sociolinguistic norms in the modern US society it portrays. A brief analysis of some of these terms shows that in the TL version, the translator has employed three strategies to deal with the many instances of swear words used by the protagonists.

Group 5

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| 5.1. Watch your goddam mouth Joe. | <i>Cuidado con lo que dices.</i> |
| 5.2. Who gives a fuck? | <i>¿A quién le importa?</i> |
| 5.3. Shut the fuck up. | <i>Cierra el pico.</i> |

Group 6

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| 6.1. I'm Fuck-face, he's Asshole | <i>Yo soy Gilipollas, él es Tonto.</i> |
| 6.2. Come on chicken shit. | <i>Vamos, marica.</i> |
| 6.3. Fuck you. | <i>A la mierda.</i> |

Group 7

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| 7.1. Fuck you. | <i>Jódete.</i> |
| 7.2. Shut the fuck up. | <i>Calla, coño.</i> |
| 7.3. You son of a bitch. | <i>Cabrón.</i> |

It is interesting to note that some expressions have been translated in two different ways (5.3.-7.2., and 6.3.-7.1.). There is no apparent reason for varying the translation of these terms, in that the amount of characters to be included in the subtitle is the same in both cases, i.e. physical limitations of space do not apply, and in the context of the film, there does not seem to be any difference between the use of the expressions in both instances. The translator, however, undoubtedly had perfectly justified reasons for opting for those terms in the subtitles.

In the examples in group 5, the translator has chosen to suppress the strong language, judging it to be superfluous. Group 6 gives us examples in which the

⁷ R. Nir: «Linguistic and Sociolinguistic Problems in the Translation of imported TV films in Israel», in *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 48, 1984, 81-97.

translator has «toned down» the language, using terms of a slightly higher registerial level. In the final group, the subtitles can be said to reflect more or less the strength and register of the terms used in the SL version.

The combined effect of these three strategies is to raise the registerial level of the TL text artificially, giving it a more elevated style which inevitably implies a loss of functional relevance of the SL version.

We have observed that this phenomenon can be explained by the difficulty of representing vulgarities in written form, but we should also mention that the translator is perhaps aware (or made to be aware by some form of censorship?) of the cultural differences between Spain and the USA as far as the use of strong language in a text intended for the general public is concerned.

In conclusion, we have examined some of the unique characteristics of this undoubtedly complicated type of translation, where the original message is passed through a series of «screens»; the translation of the text from SL to TL, its transformation from a spoken message into a written text, and its condensation in accordance with the technical constraints involved (screen width and projection time). What finally emerge and are projected onto the screen and received by the viewer are the captions that, due to the translator's efforts in overcoming the obstacles to cross-cultural communication at this level, will allow the film to be understood and, we hope, enjoyed by the TL audience.

