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DUBBIN OR SUBTITLING: THE ETERNAL DILEMMA

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Abstract

Despite the quantitative importance of translation in audiovisual mass communication, very few scholars have turned their efforts to its analysis. It is my intention to offer an account of the two major translation techniques used in the cinema, dubbing and subtitling. I will elicit some of the limitations that act upon these modes of translating and make them so different. Imposed on the translator by the medium, these constraints are responsible for the coinage of the concept 'constrained translation', a term that intends to encapsulate these empirical phenomena as translation, as opposed to adaptation.

After exploring the reasons why one of these techniques may be favoured I will finish with an evaluation of the pros and cons of both linguistic transfer methods that will enable me to propose the idea that we should do away with the aprioristic negativism surrounding synchronisation and accept that both approaches should have their place in the world of translation.

Introduction

Nowadays, in the context of continuous exchanges of audiovisual products between countries, the key role of the translator in the interlinguistic mediation seems to have been unduly neglected. Despite the relative exponential explosion in recent years of studies about translation, these have been directed mostly to a rather limited sphere of empirical data such as literature, poetry, and, to a lesser extent, drama. This situation has prompted scholars like Delabastita (1989: 193) to state that:

...phenomena such as translation in mass communication have so far been ignored almost completely, however much the quantitative importance of these phenomena is in evidence, and however much they may be assumed to play a crucial role in the linguistic, artistic, ideological, etc. organisation of our modern societies.

This neglect of the analysis of the linguistic transfer from a source language to a target language seems to be in blatant contradistinction with the extensive research that has taken place in the theoretical work concerned with film as a unique semiotic, or as Gottlieb (1997: 185) puts it, polysemiotic system, capable of transmitting a myriad of meanings and information through the image, sound and linguistic dimensions. This sole emphasis on the conception of film as an independent discursive practice has been the reason why, according to Shochat...
and Stam (1985: 35), "little attention has been directed to the role of language and language difference within film."

It is my present intention to deepen further this rather forgotten area of knowledge, by giving a contrastive account of two of the major translation techniques used in cinema, dubbing and subtitling, and by exploring the cultural and sociolinguistic implications involved in these two discrepant modes of film translation.

**Translation transfer practices in cinema**

Of the three main transfer techniques that are usually implemented, (i) dubbing or synchronisation,² (ii) subtitling and (iii) simultaneous interpreting,³ only the first two have a significant weight in film translation, whereas the latter is exclusively restricted to very specific occasions, such as film festivals, where time pressure dictates its realisation.

Both instances of linguistic transfer can be classified within the generic epigraph of what is known as *constrained translation*. In its initial conception, this term was used to give account of just one of the two techniques, when Titford (1982: 113) states that "the problems encountered in sub-titling derive essentially from the *constraints* imposed on the translator by the medium itself" (my italics). However, given its great operational and functional value, this term has been reclaimed by other scholars to incorporate a larger group of empirical realities. In this way, Rabadán (1991: 149) explicitly makes use of this taxonomic concept⁴ in order to give a full account of "all those interpolysemic transfer modes where other codes besides the linguistic one take part (cinema, songs, comics, etc.)"⁵. The coinage of this new term is part of a strategy that intends to do away with the rather negative use of the substantive *adaptation*, employed by some scholars in order to refer to what they see as *quasi-translations*. Delabastita (1989: 213-215) successfully argues that a definition of translation that is too selective and normative would be in danger of being unsuitable for the handling of most empirical phenomena.

Thus, accepting such a terminology the following step consists in analysing the different aprioristic constraints that gravitate around film translation. It was with this aim that Mayoral, Kelly and Gallardo (1988: 364) attempted to offer a systematic gradation of the various degrees of constraint that operate upon different types of communication or translation acts. Depending on the medium on which the message becomes coded, either aural or visual, and operating with
the restrictive concept of *synchrony*, understood as the “agreement between signals emitted for the purpose of communicating the same message” (1988: 359), they establish a taxonomy consisting of a maximum of six types of synchrony, closely related to the axioms of time, space, music, image, phonetics and spoken language. Therefore, in this scale ranging from 0 to 6 degrees of constraint, some acts of translation will be free of all the aforementioned limitations (such as the case of prose), while others will be subject to the influence of several. In the case that concerns us the praxis of subtitling is typified by a differential of 3-4 different synchronies, whereas dubbing has to deal with 4-5.

The answer to this ambivalence (3-4 or 4-5) lies in the music synchrony, since this is not a constant feature and it will depend on whether the film resorts to musical soundtrack, and on whether there is any need to transfer it to the target language. Every film uses two codes, image and sound, and while literature and poetry evoke, film products represent and actualize a particular reality. Thus, both dubbing and subtitling are confined in the compulsory respect that they have to pay to synchrony in these new translational parameters of image (i.e., what is being said or projected should not contradict what the characters are performing on the screen) and time (i.e., the delivery of the translated message, whether aural or written, should coincide with that of the original speech act). In their particular idiosyncrasies, subtitling has to accommodate itself to the spatial synchrony, in the sense that the physical delivery of the written message is impinged upon by the width of the screen that usually only allows a total of 35 characters per line in a maximum of two lines. Dubbing, on the other hand, has to comply with the phonetic and spoken language synchronies. The first one implies that the target language message has to follow the original movement of the lips, whereas the second means that the final product should show a certain degree of harmony between the characters and their voices, intonation, etc. As far as the lip-sync is concerned, the attitudes in different European countries vary, with countries such as Spain, the United Kingdom, France and Germany where the perfection of lip-synchronization is of paramount importance in order to avoid stigmatizing the film as a dubbed version, and countries like Italy, where they would sacrifice the meticulousness of sync to a greater degree of faithfulness towards the source language script and the original performances.

Bearing in mind the above mentioned limitations, intrinsic to the essence of film translation, it is my intention now to carry out a contrastive analysis in an attempt to elicit the pros and cons of both translation techniques.
At a first approach, one of the most striking differences that separates both transfer modes lies in the dissimilar dialectical relationship that they establish with the source product. In this sense, a film that has been dubbed may be successful in conveying to the target audience what Mason (1989: 13) refers to as *cinematic illusion*. Provided the final product respects the conditions *sine qua non* of the lip-synchronisation, the public will be led to believe that the characters in the screen are fluently expressing themselves in the target language. As is the case with all other translation instances, the translated product is delivered to the target audience wrapped in a rather fallacious independent ontological status.\(^8\) The dubbed version does not offer the public the opportunity of comparison with the original product, and those really interested will have to go to extra lengths in order to perform a contrastive analysis. On the other hand, subtitling is constantly confronting the viewer with the pure essence of translation. The fact that the target message is concurrent with the source message offers the spectator the chance of comparing and analyzing the discrepancies involved in the interlinguistic transfer. Hence, the opportunity to make values of judgement. It is this exposedness that, elsewhere, has led me to refer to subtitling as an instance of *vulnerable translation*.\(^9\) Paradoxically, it is from this same weakness that one of the greatest advantages of subtitles stems; since this duality of message presentation encapsulates a potentially pedagogic value in the learning of modern languages. Having observed that in a small country like Denmark, where subtitling is the dominant practice, there is a high proportion of the population that is able to speak several languages, Dollerup (1974: 197) affirms that among the Danes “many people must therefore be using foreign programmes as a means for keeping up, possibly even improving their command of foreign languages”. The same idea, although tackled from a wider cultural perspective, is subscribed to by O’Connell (1998: 67) when she argues that another very significant factor in the increasing popularity of subtitles is “the growing interest many Europeans now have in their neighbours, and their cultures and languages”.

Mason’s cinematic illusion would not only reassure the spectators in their cinematic enjoyment, but it would also ease the efforts that they are required to make in order to follow the dynamic development of the film discourse. If we accept that a large percentage of cinemagoers do go to the movies as a means of escaping routine and extracting full enjoyment out of this experience, it seems legitimate to affirm that dubbing is much closer to producing that effect than
subtitling. This latter technique presupposes a certain degree of literacy on the part of the viewer, who also has to take on board the double effort of having to read the discursive material codified in the target language, at the same time as having to follow the plot development encoded in the images; effort that may detract from the enjoyment of the film. Moreover, the spectator will have to put up with some other drawbacks, such as the constant flashing and vanishing of captions, the projection of subtitles against white or light coloured background that makes their reading difficult, the corruption of the original photography since it has to accommodate the written material and the inevitable loss of source information due to the physical constraints imposed upon by the width of the screen and the human impossibility of reading at the same speed as hearing. In this way it can be ventured that from the point of view of pleasure, dubbing would be the technique par excellence, whereas subtitling would be classified as a more demanding exercise.

Besides these physical limitations, there are also a series of psychological determinants inherent in both translation modes that need to be acknowledged. In the case of dubbing, despite the illusion that the characters speak our own language, we cannot help but be constantly reminded by the images, and occasionally by the music, that what we are watching, and hearing, belongs to a different culture and social environment. In the case of subtitling, the shift of medium and the required double concentration of the spectators on the concurrent sound and visual elements may hinder their participation in the emotional dimension. This rather conscious viewing may dispel the viewer's empathy towards the main character or characters in the process of identification.

Bearing in mind these contrastive considerations between both linguistic transfer methods it would be very easy to fall into the reductionist dilemma involved in the rhetorical question: dubbing or subtitling? This is a confrontation that has epitomised most of the academic exchanges in the film translation debate. In the early years, Cary (1960) opted for dubbing, defining it as an instance of traduction totale. Myers (1973: 53) criticises subtitling in a rather derogatory fashion considering it to be a symbol of the snobbery of more educated audiences, only suitable for "those who have mastered speed-reading or those who are only interested in looking at pretty shots". At the opposite end of the spectrum we find the defenders of subtitling that have advocated their ideas in favour in articles such as "Subtitling, the intelligent solution" (Reid 1978).

Apart from these antagonistic and more or less subjective views, there are
various sets of determinants that favour the choice of one method or the other, depending on heterogeneous factors of a socio-economic, cultural and political nature. From the political point of view, Danan (1991)\textsuperscript{10} offers a detailed synchronic account of the use of "dubbing as an expression of nationalism" in different European countries. Mussolini and Franco made it compulsory by law in Italy and Spain respectively, while Hitler promoted it systematically as a means of employing actors. In any case, it was used as an ideological tool with a double edge. Firstly, it favoured the predominance of a unique national language, as opposed to the national fracture of having several regional languages. Secondly, it was a covert way of manipulating and censoring the contents of the original script.

Although this was the prevailing attitude of the period, in contemporary Europe this approach would be highly controversial now and that is why the reasons that motivate the choice of one of the two translation techniques are more interdependent with other factors such as financial considerations.\textsuperscript{11} Although equipment costs are similar in both cases, labour costs are much higher in the case of dubbing. The cost-effectiveness of a film translation method is then directly proportional to the size of the potential audience, and this is why on a general basis European countries with a language spoken by a small population will tend to resort to subtitling (Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, Greece and Portugal), whereas countries with large scale languages will implement dubbing (France, Germany, Italy and Spain). Due to its inclusion in the huge anglophone audiovisual market, the case of the United Kingdom can be described as a special one where both methods are equally and rarely implemented. Despite this ambivalence, it is considered by some that dubbed versions attract more of the British public, and it is therefore seriously taken into consideration in order to boost revenue. As Charity (1996: 69) underlines in the conclusion of his review of Josiane Balasko's 1995 work, French Twist\textsuperscript{12}, the film "deserves a popular audience (to which end the distributors, Guild, will soon be releasing a dubbed print as an alternative to this, the subtitled original version)". It is possible to conclude that the prevailing dominance of one form of film translation or another in different European states is not based on the grounds of being a rich or poor country, but rather on having a large population or a small one.

Depending on the nature of the product, some scholars propose the implementation of different translation techniques. In this respect Miller considers that
"largely narrative or action scenes work well with a dubbed track, while if it's a more cerebral production subtitling may be better" (cited in Dean 1987: 38). This innate suitability, according to the genre, is also analyzed in great depth and accepted by Reid (in: Luyken 1991: 129-137). However, in my opinion, this statement suffers rather in that the ultimate choice should lie in the hands of the public and not be due to the ontological essence of the product.

Conclusion

It has not been my intention in this discussion to pontificate on which of the two techniques has greater merit, since there has already been a longstanding debate between academics on this subject. I have consistently tried to avoid professing value judgements about the suitability or preference of implementing either dubbing or subtitling as the unique approximation to film translation, since it is obvious that, from an objective point of view, both enjoy advantages and disadvantages. Nevertheless, I believe that there is a rather visceral rejection of dubbing from a well defined part of society characterised by a higher degree of education, certainly prominent in countries such as Spain. Confronted with both translation methods, we should do away with the current aprioristic neogtvism surrounding synchronisation and accept that both approaches can have their place in the world of film translation. So, if the market is offering the target public the uncontroversial opportunity of choosing between a Shakespeare play translated in verse or prose, or between the complete or abridged translation of a novel, in the same way film products should be at the disposal of the audience in both formats, dubbed and subtitled. In an ideal society both techniques could be perfectly combined in order to offer the public a wide spectrum of possibilities. In countries such as Spain, although still somewhat underdeveloped, this seems to be one of the tendencies, mainly in large cities where, from a nevertheless limited selection, the public can opt to see the same film in the cinema either dubbed or subtitled. And if Spain, traditionally a dubbing nation, is moving down the subtitling road in the exhibition of films in movie theatres, the reverse trend can be observed in countries such as Denmark and Greece where subtitling has always been the norm. In the first case, the video market has seen the emergence of double versions of primarily American family films. The VHS tape of recent American blockbusters such as *Flubber* (Les Mayfield (1997)), *Dr. Dolittle* (Betty Thomas (1998)) and *Antz* (Eric Darnell and Lawrence Guterman (1998)), containing a dubbed and subtitled version of the same
product, can be bought these days in the strongly pro-subtitling Denmark (Gottlieb 1999). Greece, on the other hand, has made some incursions in the area of dubbing with the synchronisation of some TV soap operas, only to discover that the innovation was extremely popular among housewives that could carry on with their chores and follow the plot on the screen without having to be stuck to the television set in order to read the linguistic exchanges.13

The recent, fast and ever changing technological developments in the field of audiovisual transmission, such as the advent of DVD, are a clear step in this direction of a pluralistic and variable product market, where the final decision lies in the hands of the consumer. In a similar tone, the perspectives that are opening up, thanks to the progress being made in the fields of teletext and dual channel, are also extremely exciting and promising.14

The approximation to film translation should not be reductionist but rather opt for a sort of postmodern approach. I see no need to come up with exclusionist axioms such as dubbing is better than subtitling or vice versa. We have to be aware that both techniques have their own ontological status and satisfy different social needs. Much too often the public has been ignored in these issues, despite the fact that any source product will be ultimately incorporated into a target society or culture only with public approval. For this reason, the emphasis in our societies nowadays should remain in the domain of the conjunction, and therefore rather than using the disjunctive in the original title of this paper “Dubbing or subtitling: the eternal dilemma”, the debate could be settled with a mere rephrasing: “Dubbing and subtitling: end of the dilemma”.

Notes
1. I am particularly indebted to Ian Crane for his valuable editorial comments.
2. Many scholars also refer to it as dubbing, lip-sync or simply sync.
3. Another technique, namely voice-over, is also used when translating audiovisual products, mainly some TV programmes. Its use in the cinematic world is rather limited and we can come across it in dubbed films in order to give account of voices-off. In some countries, such as Poland, this translation mode seems to have popular support in the realm of film translation.
4. She refers to it in Spanish as traducción subordinada.
5. My own translation. The Spanish original reads: “todas aquellas modalidades de transferencia interpolisémica donde intervienen otros códigos además del lingüístico (cine, canción, cómic, etc.)”.
7. Fodor (1976) offers a very detailed hypothesis of the phonetic constraints involved in dubbing.
8. This is the general rule, except in cases when the translation is accompanied by the original text in some didactic books.
10. See also Piastra (1989: 345-346) and Ballester (1995).
11. Luyken (1991: 89-109) offers a very detailed study of the costs involved in the different language transfer methods.
12. Translation of the original French title, Gazon Maudit.
14. Karamitroglou (1999) offers a very comprehensive overview of the impact that digital technology is having (and may have) on audiovisual translation.

Works cited


