Film Translation: Aesthetics of Adaptation

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to put under light the major features of the pragmatic strategy applied in film translation. The audiovisual texts, particularly films, are very complex media. They are interesting and challenging examples of multimedia data for a number of reasons. The translator encounters verbal and non-verbal information expressed openly or metaphorically through patterns of light and shade, dialogue, sound effects, film editing techniques, music and the actions of characters.

Key words: Film; Translation; Adaptation; Subtitling; Language; Text; Culture; Domestication; Foreignization.

To appreciate a film, a viewer must not only recognize what is depicted but also understand cause-effect relationships, characters emotional relations and ideas about the filmmaker's intentions. That is to say, the viewer combines sounds, intonations, visual signs, gestures and music in order to create a message. In other words, what is said and the way it is said form an integral part of the message.

Subtitling is a kind of adaptation, or 'tradaptation', tightly related to the initial dialogues. It is more than a sheer linguistic shift, since it entails the transmission and communication of cultural capital.

Cultural implications are essential in any film. Subtitling is a necessary double-edged medium to know other cultures from the original, but at the same time, learning through the target language what could be said in the film is very important. But does it fit all the cases and meet all the viewer's needs?

Subtitling is a text, which reads what is said in the film. In this definition, two interrelated key words are underlined: film and text. These two prerequisite factors reveal the double nature of subtitling. It is the textuality, which integrates meanings in accordance with audiovisual images.

Subtitling is the translation of the spoken source language dialogue into the target language. It is usually found at the bottom of the screen, in the form of synchronized captions. It alters the source text and enables the target audience to get personal experiences about the foreignness of such text. The viewer, thus, could experience its flavour, its mood and its particularity. The screen critic Agnieszka Szarkowska points out:

> *Subtitling is a more authentic mode than dubbing. The audience is not allowed to forget about the foreignness of a translated film and is constantly reminded of its authenticity as it hears the original dialogues throughout the film.*[1]

The original film offers a unique chance to listen to the original source dialogue; the viewers may only consult the subtitles, when they find it necessary. They can, sometimes, be perceived as "a hindrance to the potential enjoyment of a film or television programme by the narrow-mindedness of the English speaking nations."[2]

Subtitles are usually found in English speaking films, because of the hegemony of Anglo-American film manufacture (production). On the other hand, the growing importance to the English language itself, mainly in this world of globalization, people want to know more about all what is English: the way they behave, the way they live, the way they speak, etc… Referring to research carried out, G. M. Luykens and T. Herbert, et al, write:

> *It substantiated the view that there is a viable audience base on which a more flexible, innovative and cost effective approach towards foreign language programming can be built and*

that time, as evidenced by the Dutch longitudinal survey.[3]

In the subtitle, the viewer hears the dialogue in another language reads the subtitle and watches the picture. This textual version offers the viewers a total access to the original dialogue through sound and image, and backs them for semantic reasons if a difficulty in understanding occurs. They are added to films, when they are released in a country that speaks a different language to that used in the film. Subtitling makes it clear that what the audience is watching is actually foreign. It is easier for the subtitler to explain the meaning of the sign by inserting a subtitle with the target language equivalent. Translation in the form of subtitling seems to go along those lines. While meeting and satisfying viewers'expectations and curiosity concerning other cultures, it ensures soundtrack to be obtained and thus, "the integrity of a holistic performance to be preserved."(Mera 1999: 75)

The foreignness of a film can be augmented by the fact that subtitling involves a change from a spoken medium, the original, to a written medium in the form of one—or two liners at the bottom of the screen. Mera claims that, "subtitles change film from an audiovisual medium to a more literary medium, which requires a greater level of attention from a viewer than a dubbed film." (1999: 79)

The scene forms an integral part of the plot. This might affect the way in which the dialogues are transposed in the subtitled and dubbed versions. In order to convey the 'core' of the script, translators often forget that it is not only the dialogues from the main plot that constitute the substance of the film. I. Kovacic underlines that "The genre partly determines the linguistic register to be used."[4] Many factors are important in the full comprehension of a film: For example, dialects, idiolects, register or expressions of politeness frequently undergo reduction in subtitling. Consequently, "the minor subtractions that litter these scenes may not seem significant in terms of the general understanding, but during the course of a whole film they add up to a large number of drastically altered meanings." (Mera 1999: 78)

It is extremely difficult for a writer to transmit the richness of human communication, when it comes to non-verbal communication. As subtitling is a written form of the language, we could say that it experiences similar limitations. At the same time, the soundtrack helps to replace some of the information omitted from the subtitles.[5]

Subtitling is a kind of writing full of constraints. It is for the reader to establish the complex, implicit links that fall under meaning. To subtitle a text, we are constrained to force, reorder and reorganize its syntax

so that we get the adequate way to be closer to the meaning of the dialogue. Some audiovisual works are harmoniously subtitled; others fail, due to the complexity of the dialogue text. Subtitling is not an integral part of the film, but an imposed part of it.

Subtitling is an invented written form used to serve orality of the film. The film dialogue is not only said, it is equally played with all its bodily, physical expressions. They, actively, contribute in the understanding of the sense of the dialogue. If the viewer reads the subtitle and watches only the image, how could he comprehend the sense of the film? In other words, the more we read the subtitle, the more we read the image. The subtitle is not fully understandable, if the viewer only reads the image linguistically. Subtitle could be a support to the image and to the meaning the image wants to communicate as a whole. P. Zabalbeascoa points out: « No text can be made entirely of verbal signs because such signs always need some sort of physical support."[6] Or in the words of Henri Gottlied: "The translated text encompasses much more than the rephrasing of original verbal utterances."[7]

The example to be given, here, as an illustration is the film of Elia Kaza produced in 1952 and entitled A Streetcar Named Desire[8] (Un Tramway Nommé Désir) adapted from the play of Tennessee Williams. The film is diffused in the original, but the viewer has the

possibility to read the corresponding concise subtitle in French. The sentence, « Sit down on this pew. », for example, is said in one second, i e, in a duration, which allows the reading of 16 letters. The full translation is: « Asseyez-vous sur ce banc d'église. »: It contains 28 letters; it is, anyway, very long to read. « Asseyez-vous. » has no more than 11, and « Assis » only 5. Our reader, who is accustomed to read subtitles, will acknowledge that the last two versions are acceptable. But how can the viewer get the full meaning without mentioning the word 'pew' of the original text? Certainly the word has disappeared from the text, but remains, of course, in the image. Textualising it, we obtain the following combination: Text "Assis" + visual element of boys for the virtual « You » + Visual element of the direction with the hand for the virtual text « to the near place » + the visual element of the "pew". This time, the textualisation completes the subtitled version. Speaking about the interrelatedness of the subtitle and the image-making, the critic Taylor Christopher writes:

> *It is words that provide the main vehicle of meaning, and subtitles can serve both ends: if they are short, yet pertinent and unobtrusive, they can carry the dialogue and also leave the viewer time to absorb the other visual clues, on the other hand, where necessary, they can be used to clarify cultural mores that may confuse the target*

audience in a more subtle way than having extra explanations incorporated orally into dubbing.[9]

Henri Gottlied points out that the short duration of the onscreen subtitle makes reading quicker and fluent. It equally offers the viewer the advantage of both reading and watching. In other words, he leans more to the concision of the subtitle, which gives more speed to its reading:

> *The demand for text volume reduction in subtitling is neither semiotically nor technically motivated, the only reason being that the reading speed of viewers is supposed to be slower than the (average) speech tempo in the original dialog. Although contemporary empirical data on audience perception is lacking, viewers in today's subtitling communities are probably faster readers than earlier generations. (Gottlied: 19)*

Interestingly, the image and the sound, backed by subtitling, often secure the viewer. The later misses less the content of the film and understands more the dialogue.

Certainly, the elimination of redundant features from the film discourse leads to a quantitative reduction. Such fact affects the normalization of the text and, subsequently, presents the audience a non-standard version of the original. But time and space constraints

often force the subtitler to leave out some controversial, cumbersome elements from the version.

Another example of the film translation is The Piano[10](Written by Paul Auster and produced by Wayne Wang). Two cultures come in contact: The British Colonialists and the Maoris of New Zealand. Language and culture are inextricably linked. In his book on visual communication, S. North reveals the different permeations of culture and forms of expression. He writes: "When we make films, paint pictures, carve doorposts, dress, set our tables, and furnish our homes as well as when we speak, we are using symbolic forms which are part of culture and which are all possibly related."[11]

In a subtitled version, it is noticeably evident that the film, The Piano, is foreign as we hear the original dialogues. The image reveals elements, which point to the nationality of the film. In the words of Varela F. Chaume, "Cultural signs transmitted by visual information […] complement the verbal subtext in the source text."[12]

Body language, or "physical expressiveness,"[13] may be culturally determined. The screen vehicles a cultural representation, which is to a great extent dissimilar to the viewer's cultural system. Indeed, the film presents a number of cultural realities: British

Colonialists in the 19th century New Zealand, Maoris, New Yorkers and South Africans. To what point does the audiovisual translator mediate between the verbally and visually specific cultures? Here is a concrete example:

The Piano (Film)

| **English Version** | **French Subtitle** |

Flora: Look, I'm a very

    big moth …………………. Je suis une grosse mite

    : Will I catch fire? …………... Je vais prendre feu?

We note, here, the translation of "une grosse mite" for "a very big moth." This is unsuitable and adds pejorative connotation not present in the original. "The creation of authentic dialogue at a further remove, that is in translation into another language and cultural environment," Christopher points out, "is even more of a challenge. There are problems at a linguistic, structural level, at a paralinguistic level and, perhaps most importantly, on a more abstract, pragmatic, even ideological plane."(10)

In real life, dialogues are open, flexible and said in a less condensed way. As we progress in conversation, the meaning constantly progresses in pace with the dialogue. In other words, meaning is negotiated

during dialogic exchange. All communicative acts exist only in terms of the 'other' and within a set of circumstances. In Bakhtinian words:

> *The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intentions, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention.*[14]

Much of the language used may have a contextual function as opposed to the mere experiential imparting of information. "It is in this regard that some of the advantages of subtitles can be traced, both in terms of what they say and what they leave unsaid."(Taylor 12)

Maoris and Europeans meet, but they do not understand each other's languages and cultures. The Maori dialogues are subtitled in both versions and reveal how they value tradition, superstition, and their strong link to their land. In the following extract, the Maoris dialogue is translated in English and subtitled in French. A Maori touches Ada's face and expresses his wonder:

The Piano (Film)

English Version	French Subtitle
Maori: Look how pole-like……..Elles sont pôles comme	
Angel	des Anges (Pettit : 33)

It seems that what are sacrificed in are the textual and impersonal elements. But subtitles can enable the viewer to pick up the unsaid and dissipates its ambiguous threads. As it is mentioned, film translation is not really a linguistic matter. It is an activity, which is closely dependent on the functional needs and cultural demands of the original film. Film can be, and often is, a powerful vehicle for values and ideas. It is a medium, or a channel, which transfers cultures, through music, dialogue and image.

However, the translator is parted between keeping the flavour of the source culture of the film and the will of transferring the text to the target audience. About such tension, Vermeer writes:

> *A source text is usually composed originally for a situation in the source culture. It is thus not to be expected that merely 'trans-coding' a source text, will result in a serviceable translation [...] The target text is oriented towards the target culture and it is this which ultimately defines its adequacy.(qtd in Christopher: 15)*

What is of primary importance is the profound influence in the translating process. Both cultures, source and target, are mutually relating, yet, antagonistically differing.

Subtitling can be considered as a part of the foreignization realm: The crucial role of the source culture is stressed, foreign identity highlighted and the influence of the target culture minimized. "No text is, strictly, speaking monomodel. Traditional texts, hypertexts, screen texts," Yves Gambier, underlines, "combine semiotic resources."[15]

Culture-specific visual information tends to be left for the viewer to interpret. The translator tends to portray to their audience the spirit and heart of the work, rather than striving to provide a pure literal translation of the spoken words. The subtitler tries hard to remain closer to his audience as well as to the source text in order to keep its liveliness. In this way, he ensures to the audience the essential facts and aesthetic concerns of the film. Subtitling emphasizes the foreign nature of a film. The subtitled, translated material could be placed somewhere along domestication-foreignness continuum.

The text is perceived as an integral part of the world and not as "an isolated specimen of language."[16] Consequently, the process of translation is determined by the degree of reciprocity as well as receptiveness the source and target cultures have.

Are we constrained to consider translation and adaptation two sides of the same coin, or rather two points on a continuum? Is translation the replication of

the original text, and adaptation the mediator between language and its culture? Is our process of transfer a translated adaptation or an adapted translation? Conventionally speaking, adaptation and translation are interdependent. Such interdependence gives flexibility in the transfer of language-culture from the source to the target. As far as film is concerned, subtitling is more convenient than dubbing. Whenever affordability, dialogue authenticity, acquisition of foreign-language is privatized in audiovisual translation, subtitling is the obvious solution.

The choice of the translating strategy depends on the attitude of the target culture vis-à-vis the source culture, and it is not uncommon that it is political factors that determine the chosen mode. It becomes apparent that translating films is not merely a linguistic problem, but rather an activity that is "conditioned to a large extent by the functional needs of the receiving culture and not, or not just, by the demands made by the source films."[17]

English speaking countries, and the United States in particular, have the upper hand and are pulling the strings in the movie industry today: "Globalization is generally synonymous with unidirectional Anglicisation, the dominance of the English language and Anglo-American culture at the expense of other languages and cultures."[18] Metaphorically speaking, foreign means anything that is not English.(Mera:79)

Domestication is understood as "translating a transparent, fluent, 'invisible' style in order to minimize the foreignness of the target text."[19] The result is that all foreign elements are assimilated into the dominant target culture, thus depriving the target audience of crucial characteristics of the source culture, which is also shown in the following quote:

> *The dominant trend towards domestication in translating from American English over the last three centuries has had a normalizing and neutralizing effect, depriving source text producers of their voice and re-expressing foreign culture values in terms of what is familiar (and therefore unchallenging) to the dominant culture.*[20]

In conclusion, I would say:

Since domestication privileges the target culture, it goes without saying that it undermines the source culture. It also displaces the film producer from his work and disables him to communicate his message correctly. In other words, 'tradaptation' becomes a form of conquest more than a form of transfer. It domesticates foreign texts and inscribes them with linguistic as well as cultural values that are specific to the target audience. That is to say, there is a kind of exclusion of the other from his text.

Foreignization of a text is a form of keeping its foreignness. It is a kind of sending the viewer abroad outside himself and outside his world frontier. The subtitler keeps the constituency of the text's originality and highlights its foreign identity (the sense of its otherness), and thus, the dominance of target culture becomes impossible.

The ideal way, then, is to keep the original text without dubbing, and putting an onscreen subtitle: this form of transfer makes the viewer a hearer and reader, and consequently a judge of the work and its intentions. Much of what is lost in subtitles could be compensated while hearing the original.

Cultural meanings are determined differently by the viewer and the producer. The way the viewer decodes the production is particularly different from the intended meaning of the producer. The background of an entirely different language and national culture can, however, surely only increase these possibilities.

Subtitling offers, faithfully, the original triad to the viewer: sound, and music and original dialogue. The production remains all foreign, and the subtitler makes it, with care and objectivity, closer to the target audience.

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