

Challenges of Subtitling an Audiovisual Text

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Abstract

The tremendous advance achieved in terms of information and communication technologies has brought about many changes in how people communicate. Moreover, image and sound have become an integral part of our daily lives, and have been largely exploited by advertisers and film producers. Therefore, this article will be intended to explore the semiotics of the audiovisual text and highlight the major role played by nonverbal signs in shaping and clarifying the audiovisual content. And as the transfer of this content from one language to another and one culture to another poses a set of challenges, we will try to suggest some strategies that are likely to help overcome those difficulties.

Keywords: Audiovisual Text; Audiovisual Translation; Verbal Elements; Nonverbal Elements; Subtitling.

1. Introduction

The new media technologies have, over the last decades, revolutionized human communication as the internet, television and mobile phones have become some of the major means of disseminating knowledge and exchanging ideas and values among communities. In order to overcome the linguistic and cultural barriers, the data of those products have been translated and distributed all over the world.

This flourishing activity has attracted the attention of many scholars and academicians in translation who have conducted valuable research on audiovisual translation. However, we have noticed that most of the works carried out hinge on the linguistic aspect of the audiovisual text and the technical constraints posed by its translation. The nonverbal aspect has been, to some extent, ignored, while the audiovisual text relies mainly on a large array of semiotic systems such as: image and sound. This is probably due to the fact that those nonverbal cues are dynamic and give rise to different interpretations according to one's cultural, social and educational background.

Therefore, we will try to get a glimpse at the interplay between the three modes of communication in audiovisual texts: language, image and sound, i.e the verbal and nonverbal cues and we will see how those signs interact to shape the overall meaning of the audiovisual product, and then present the strategies that can help transfer it from one language to another.

2. On the Audiovisual Text and its Translation

Text has for a long time been perceived as a set of verbal signs, sentences and occurrences. Although it is often accompanied by additional elements such as illustrations that contribute to the construction of its meaning, these surrounding signs were not viewed as an integral part and were therefore mostly overlooked by scholars. However, this conception has dramatically changed, as new communication systems have emerged and superseded verbal language.

Challenges of Subtitling an Audiovisual Text

The audiovisual text, that entails the use of two main channels: visual and auditory, is “*a semiotic construct comprising several signifying codes that operate simultaneously in the production of meaning.*”¹. So, meaning in audiovisual texts emerges from the interplay between verbal elements, i.e the spoken or written word and non-verbal elements such as the image and the soundtrack. In this regard, Diaz Cintas & Remael have defined subtitling as:

*“a translation practice that consists of presenting a written text, generally on the lower part of the screen, that endeavours 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 (song, voices off).”*²

Therefore, the content of the subtitles has to be in harmony and coherent with the image on screen, the soundtrack and the dialogue of the characters, as most of the information in films is conveyed by the characters’ gestures, posture, facial expression and voice qualities.

However, translating this semiotic product in its entirety from one culture to another constitutes a big challenge, as the translator is subjected to some linguistic, cultural and technical constraints imposed by the nature of the audiovisual text itself. Moreover, he has to cope with harsh working conditions such as tight deadlines, and sometimes inaccessibility to the source product and state-of-the-art software programs make his task even harder. Thus, he does not always have the

possibility to carry out a thorough analysis of the source text and render all its intricacies. Furthermore, he has to comply with the rules and conventions imposed by the production company and subtitling company (in terms of the number of characters and lines, the positioning, the duration and layout of the subtitles, and the punctuation rules) and meet the expectations of the audience.

The change of mode, i.e from colloquial oral language to written standard language implied by subtitling and the temporal and spatial constraints imposed by this mode of AVT, produces a rather condensed and monotonous version of the Source Text. Indeed, all the features of orality as the use of dialectal words, colloquialisms and accents tend to be eliminated, standardizing therefore the SL, Goris says in this regard:

“(...) standardization in subtitling (...) imposes the elimination of dialectal language (...) The social differentiation of the language is not maintained. The vulgar terms and expression are eliminated, and even the popular elements are “corrected”.³

Omitting this linguistic variation is likely to alter the overall meaning of the audiovisual product, as the producer or screenwriter usually tries to convey a message through the use of words and expressions peculiar to a given social community. However, This process of standardization, referred to as “*style zero*”⁴, is partly due to the fact that producing an equivalent idiomatic language in the subtitles is almost unattainable, as the phonetic, syntactic and linguistic specificities of

the two idioms are utterly disparate. Besides, words that can seem synonyms can generate different connotations.

Specificities of pronunciation and polite formulas are also omitted, a polite request as “*I’m terribly sorry to bother you, but I wonder if you would be so kind as to lower your voices a little*”⁵ is unlikely to be subtitled literally or by its equivalent, as it will require a lot of space.

Items that are rather rude and offensive or against the religious principles of some communities are often omitted or toned down⁶, even if they carry a range of emotional meanings. However, those strategies are largely dependent on the working language, the culture of the target viewer and the type of the medium (Cinema, television, DVD). When subtitling into Arabic, for instance, swearwords are often omitted or “softened” by the use of words that render the emotions carried by those words as anger, frustration, surprise and joy. Some may argue that each swearword expresses a given and intense feeling and has therefore to be kept in the receiving culture and subtitled, but this loss of intensity can, in fact, be compensated by nonverbal signs as the character’s kinesics and paralinguage.

The tendency to omit some relevant items is likely to affect the whole message of the audiovisual text, as signs materializing the expressive function of language do contribute to the meaning of the product, since they are usually connotative and indicate the relationships between the interlocutors, the characters’ intense emotions and educational background.

The task of the subtitler is quite challenging as he has to meet the requirements of different clients and comply with the norms of readability and acceptability⁸ that materialize mainly in the choice of the register and the style adopted in the target language. He has also to comply with the norm of “pertinence”⁹ as he has to define the information that has to be omitted, added, kept or clarified, according to the expectations of the subtitling and dubbing company, the target viewer and the type of the medium (TV, internet, DVD, cinema).

3. Verbal and Non-verbal Communication in the Audiovisual Text

As indicated above, communication is carried out through a set of codes and channels; the spoken language is always accompanied by kinesic and prosodic cues. Cosnier and Brossard¹⁰ classify the cues involved in face-to-face communication according to the organs emitting and receiving the units as follows:

a- The vocal and acoustic signs that can indicate the speakers’ age, character, status, social and geographic origin and emotions. They are in two categories: the verbal, i.e phonological, lexical and morpho-syntactic material and the paraverbal, prosodic or vocal material that includes intonation, pauses, timber, tone, flow, the specificities of pronunciation and all the features of voice; it is also referred to as “vocal communication”¹¹. Poyatos¹² defines paralanguage as the voice features and the silences that accompany, emphasize or contradict the verbal and kinesic message.

b- The corporal and visual signs, i.e the physical appearance of the interlocutors that indicates their mood,

social and cultural background. This category is divided into:

- slow kinesics, i.e attitudes, posture and position (distance, eye contact, leaning, etc.)
- fast kinesics, i.e eye contact, gestures and facial expressions

It is worth mentioning, however, that signals of paralanguage and kinesics can have different communicative values. In eastern communities, for example, people tend to use gestures to greet or express gratitude¹³. Maintaining eye-contact in western communities can be interpreted as a sign of respect and self-confidence, whereas it is viewed by easterners as rude and offensive. This is why, when talking to a superior, they tend to look at his Adam's apple. As for paralanguage, differences can be noticed in terms of intonation patterns used to convey a range of emotions as surprise, irony, happiness, etc. and stress some items. In some languages, exclamations (such as "Phew") and some cues that fulfill a phatic function can suffice to communicate, whereas in others one needs lexical items.

Snell-Hornby says in this regard that *"Paralinguistic and kinesic behaviour may vary widely, and the perception and evaluation of such behavior may be lexicalized quite differently, leading to considerable difficulty for the translator."*¹⁴ The difficulty is even bigger in subtitling as it is hard to reproduce a falling and rising intonation (especially in tag questions), and even if this pattern can be rendered by lexical units, sometimes the subtitler does not have enough space for that, as he has to respect the in-time and out-time of the subtitles.

The paraverbal and nonverbal signs are of paramount importance in audiovisual translation, as they contextualize the verbal message and most importantly they help perceive the intended meaning of the character. According to Nahl, Danet, and Norton, “*movement information complements verbal messages by anticipating, contradicting, or being concurrent with the referents of the verbal channel*”.¹⁵ They can also complement and emphasize the meaning carried by the verbal signs and indicate the status and the very emotions (especially facial expressions) of the interlocutors. Kerbrat-Oreccioni says in this regard:

*“(…) la fonction référentielle est assurée surtout par le matériel verbal, ainsi que la fonction métalinguistique et métacommunicative, alors que les fonctions expressive et phatique reposent surtout sur les éléments paraverbaux et nonverbaux, ainsi que l’ensemble des significations relationnelles”*¹⁶

On the pragmatic¹⁷ level, speech acts, especially the indirect ones can be performed and interpreted thanks to the paraverbal cues, saying therefore: “*it’s hot in here*”, can be interpreted as a request to open the window when accompanied by prosodic and kinesic cues.

To render the meaning connoted by prosodic and kinesic signals, subtitlers usually use punctuation marks or lexical units, depending on the working language. To indicate prosodic signs such as hesitation and pause, for instance, subtitlers tend to use the suspension dots, and to stress items and indicate irony, puns or metaphors, they usually use quotation marks.

Therefore, when subtitling, the translator should not rely mainly on the spoken dialogue, he has to take into account all the accompanying cues as the image and the soundtrack. In some films, emphasis is placed on nonverbal cues, as they are more evocative, a whole message can be conveyed through a gesture, a gaze, because as we say “an image is worth a thousand words”.

According to Delabastita the audiovisual text is composed of the following elements:

- 1- the acoustic-verbal: dialogue, monologue,...
- 2- the acoustic-nonverbal: sound effects and noises, music, interjections
- 3- the visual nonverbal: image, gestures, facial expression,
- 4- the visual verbal: letters, newspaper headlines, subtitles, names of places, etc.¹⁸

Therefore, the difficulty lies in perceiving the interaction between those elements (language, i.e the dialogue, words, paralinguage: intonation, kinesics) in the film and finding the appropriate strategies that help render it. However, the information conveyed visually can facilitate the task of the subtitler as the role of the dialogue can be redundant, i.e it carries the same communicative value as the image. And it is this redundancy that justifies the omission strategy adopted by subtitlers, as the subtitles have to be as concise as possible in order to enable the viewer to enjoy what is happening on the screen.

In some films, the story can be told via the visual, verbal and nonverbal cues as in the recent silent film *The*

Artist (Michel Hazanavicius, 2011) that won many awards. Kinesics and the soundtrack were instrumental in that film as they were in *Forest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994) and many other films. The lyrics and the melody denoted the true feelings and mood of the characters to the extent that we could feel their anger, disappointment, happiness and frustrations. This is why they have to be subtitled and highlighted by putting them in italics or between inverted commas (in the case of Arabic) in order to distinguish them from the normal font. In *Forest Gump* (1994), the soundtrack reflected mainly the periods of time represented in the film.

Inserts do also contribute to the story and are often deeply connected to the dialogue. And we can illustrate this by a scene from *Forrest Gump*. After being discharged, Forrest passed by a peace gathering at the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool and was invited to express his opinion about the war in Vietnam. As he was speaking (the speaker system was not in fact working and no one could hear him), the camera sets on people holding signs in which we can read “*bring the troops home now*”, “*stop war*”, “*support our GIs*”, etc. Those signs were relevant to the film and did not interfere with the dialogue, so they should have been subtitled in order to help the viewer grasp the message that the producer wanted to send through this scene.

As we have said earlier, the image is of paramount importance in the audiovisual text; it complements, emphasizes or contradicts the verbal message. The subtitler has, therefore, to render the intended meaning of the character’s utterance in

combination with it. But when the dialogue is redundant, i.e the message can be construed through the image, the subtitler can then omit some verbal elements, Cintas & Rемаel say in this regard: *“in writing, a noun may be replaced by a pronoun, whereas in audiovisual texts pronouns in the dialogue can refer to people or objects on the screen.”*¹⁹

When the image is presented on its own, it can express different emotions and meanings, as every viewer will interpret it according to his/her cultural and educational background and personal experiences. Also, people react differently to the same objects. The feather that can be seen at the opening and conclusion of *Forrest Gump*, for example, has had many interpretations according to everyone's own perception of the film.

In general, images are interpreted by combining the representation pictured and our worldly knowledge, Stöckl says in this regard: *“It is the similarity between optical impressions gained from picture viewing and real-world vision that facilitates meaning making in images”*.²⁰ But, in the audiovisual text, images have to be translated only when linked to the verbal message, Gregor Goethals says in this regard: *“While the evocative power of images remains strong, our constructions of meaning are, at the same time, prompted and guided by an accompanying text”*.²¹

It appears from the precedent analysis that a correct rendering of the message of the audiovisual text involves a thorough analysis of all its components. The subtitler has to define the importance and role of each item and mainly the elements that ensure the text's

cohesion and coherence. Moreover, he has to explicit, by addition or reformulation²², some of the cultural references pictured in the film and render the intended meaning of the character, as the source and target viewers do not possess the same cultural background. In some cases, the nonverbal elements do fill the gap left by the spoken dialogue. In all cases, there will always be a loss at the semantic or stylistic level, but the subtitler should get his priorities right.

Conclusion

The conclusion that can be drawn is that many considerations come into play in the decision-making process, as the subtitler has to take into account the text type and its purpose and live up to the expectations of the client. And considering all the constraints imposed by the medium, he has less room for maneuver. However, the nature of the audiovisual text may facilitate his task, as image, kinesics and the soundtrack do complement the verbal message.

Moreover, omitting some redundant and unnecessary items will provide more time to the viewer to process the image and enjoy the film, as overloaded subtitles tend to distract his attention and exhaust him. Also, one has to mention that American films are mainly watched by youngsters and these later usually have a prior knowledge about the language and the culture of the source product thanks to globalization.

Last, since every item has a communicative value in the audiovisual text and as the nonverbal is inextricably intertwined with the verbal, the subtitler has first to construe the values and meanings carried by the

image and perceive its interplay with the other semiotic systems composing the audiovisual text, and then find the appropriate strategies that help render this product.

Notes

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- (7) C. KERBRAT-ORECCHIONI. *Les interactions verbales*. Armand Colin, Paris, 3ème ed. 1998, p. 151.
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- (9) Idem.
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