

At the Threshold of Cinematic Translation: Aesthetics of the In-Between and the Imperatives of Fidelity

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Abstract:

This paper investigates the complex practice of film translation as a multidimensional process that encompasses linguistic, cultural, and aesthetic adaptation. The study analyzes two central techniques -Dubbing and Subtitling- through the lens of audiovisual translation theory, exploring their respective advantages and limitations regarding linguistic fidelity, cultural adaptation, production cost, and viewer experience. Drawing on comparative examples from Arabic and global cinema, the paper highlights how translational choices influence audience comprehension and artistic reception. It concludes that the selection between dubbing and subtitling transcends mere technical considerations, reflecting broader cultural, commercial, and interpretive dynamics that define film translation as a nuanced art of negotiation.

Keywords:

Film Translation; Dubbing; Subtitling; Cultural Adaptation; Viewing Experience.

Introduction

Audiovisual translation ranks among the most complex forms of translation, given its interwoven linguistic, cultural, aesthetic, and technical dimensions. As cinematic works increasingly circulate beyond their native contexts, the need for effective translation tools becomes more pressing — ones capable of conveying the artistic message to audiences of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Within this landscape, dubbing and subtitling have emerged as two primary modalities, differing significantly in both translation philosophy and viewer experience. This study seeks to deconstruct this dichotomy through an analytical exploration of the stakes involved in film translation, which hinges on a delicate equation balancing artistic authenticity with the expectations of the local audience.

Film translation poses a fundamental challenge: how to transmit the aesthetic and cultural essence of a film to a different audience without compromising the integrity of the original text or disrupting the reception experience. Given the presence of two competing techniques — dubbing and subtitling — a central question arises: which approach best achieves a balance between textual fidelity and cultural adaptation, especially in light of linguistic, aesthetic, and market considerations that transform translation into a strategic decision.

Sub-questions

- How does the choice of translation technique influence the audience's perception of the film's content?
- What cultural and psychological factors shape viewers' preferences for one method over the other?
- Is effective cultural adaptation possible without compromising original meaning?
- What technical and aesthetic challenges do translators face with both dubbing and subtitling?

Hypotheses

- Dubbing enhances sensory and psychological immersion for viewers, while subtitling preserves the original artistic flavor.
- Audience preference for one technique is more influenced by cultural and linguistic factors than by technical ones.
- Translators' choices in this domain inevitably involve some degree of cultural adaptation, making complete neutrality in audiovisual translation an illusion.

Methodology and Study Structure

This study adopts a descriptive-analytical approach, aimed at understanding the structure of the phenomenon through a breakdown of its technical and aesthetic components, grounded in translation theory and audiovisual studies. A comparative framework is also employed to examine the merits and constraints of dubbing versus subtitling, supported by applied examples from both international and Arab cinema. This allows for an assessment of how translation decisions affect viewer experience and enables the identification of criteria for balanced cultural reception. These themes will be explored through the following axes:

- The film as sender and the audience as receiver: a study in interaction and influence;
- The dilemma of choosing between dubbing and subtitling in transmitting cinematic messages;
- Films between the fidelity of literal translation and the necessities of adaptation and interpretation.

I. The Film as Speaker and the Audience as Receiver: A Study in Interaction and Influence

The fusion of image, motion, and sound in cinema constitutes a kind of intensified life, a form of immortality, an eternal and enchanting mirror. Yet, it also poses a threat to life itself, as it risks replacing reality, becoming a source of distraction, fragmentation, and perpetual illusion. Cinema is a human-made world that blends undeniable truth with absolute deception ⁽¹⁾.

I-1. The Nature of Film as a Cultural and Artistic Medium

As a visual narrative, film combines the realms of storytelling, photography, sound, and movement. This intangible *index of reality* shared between cinematic imagery and the real world reinforces the viewer's sense that what they see is authentic ⁽²⁾. During the film, the viewer becomes detached from the outside world, ready to embrace the diegetic universe. However, this immersion may lead to a state where distinguishing between reality and fiction becomes difficult, due to the *impression of reality* the film generates ⁽³⁾.

The viewer's surrender resembles a dream state, though true illusion is reserved for dreams alone. What the viewer experiences is not illusion, but rather an impression of reality. They allow themselves to momentarily drift into the film, engage with it, and briefly "doze," only to later regain distance. This creates a sense of satisfaction with the experience, not necessarily with the film's quality or features.

Through a Freudian lens, one may observe a parallel between an enthusiastic audience and sleepwalkers: both are driven by a sensation akin to sleep. Yet, while the sleepwalker remains unchanged, the viewer is awakened by their own actions. Moreover, we cannot definitively say the sleepwalker is dreaming, unlike the viewer, whose cinematic "sleep" coincides with a dreamlike state. Thus, the viewer dreams part of the film, not because it was imagined, but because it was presented onscreen and perceived in a dreamlike manner.

The narrative film viewer loses awareness of being in a cinema. The ego may desire sleep and dreaming, when necessary, but the unconscious never sleeps. What we call sleep is merely an *economic modification* of pre-conscious and conscious states. The awakening of one part of the ego, allowing another part to continue sleeping, typically involves a form of censorship inseparable from the *dream work* and its deepest characteristics, those in which the dreamer forgets they are dreaming.

Conscious awareness may be responsible for sustaining the dream while knowing it is a dream, much like watching a film and anticipating scenes that are more gratifying or less terrifying. There is an inverse relationship between wakefulness and the degree of illusion. Despite the parallels between viewer and dreamer, the viewer remains awake, while the dreamer is asleep. Dissatisfaction arises when the viewer is deprived of sufficient fantasy, leading to frustration and the perception of the film as "boring" or "gloomy" ⁽⁴⁾.

I-2. The Nature of the Receiving Audience

Some scholars consider the viewer's experience in cinemas a form of psychological therapy. In reality, what unfolds is the result of a feeling of *identification*, which Alain Bergola defines as follows:

- Identification is both the mechanism of the imaginary constitution of the ego (a founding function) and the core, the prototype and a number of subsequent psychical instances and processes through which the ego, once constituted, continues to differentiate itself (a matrix function) ⁽⁵⁾.
- Identification thus serves as the cornerstone, the first brick in the imaginary palaces or huts constructed by the viewer's imagination. The emotional mortar that binds these structures depends on the viewer's psychological responses, which may range from rejection and disapproval to admiration and delight ⁽⁶⁾.

During the screening, the viewer may experience a sense of helplessness, unable to intervene in the unfolding events, especially when the film's narrative resonates with aspects of their own life, or even when it evokes strong emotions without mirroring any personal experience ⁽⁷⁾.

Cinematic imagery and camera angles play a pivotal role in shaping this sense of identification. As Baudry (in Cha) suggests, the viewer is less concerned with what is represented - the scene itself - than with the mechanisms that render the scene visible. This compels the viewer to see what is shown, a function that the camera fulfills as a form of reinforcement.

There is a marked difference between how one interacts with a novel and with a film, even when both recount the same story. Reading allows the reader to imagine characters and settings, effectively becoming the director of the narrative. The reader may choose, for instance, how far to visualize the horror of a crime. In contrast, film deprives the viewer of this imaginative freedom, presenting the story as envisioned by its creators. Cinematic elements - camera angles, lighting, and soundtrack - impose a fixed interpretation, making the scene feel more real than imagined. When the viewer shudders, they enter the film's world and experience the duality of reality and fiction.

It remains difficult to determine which is more pleasurable: imagining the world of a novel or witnessing it embodied on screen.

I-3. Film Studies and the Dialectics of Reception

Film studies and research focused on audience reception remain relatively scarce, with most inquiries centering on the viewer's capacity to construct meaning. This is underscored by Staiger, who notes: "Reception is certainly, if we observe the very limited use of reception theory in film studies, focused on the audience's ability to generate meaning" ⁽⁸⁾.

Here, *meaning* refers to the ideas, values, and interpretations that the viewer derives from a film, which may, at times, influence their worldview and openness to certain perspectives. This is particularly evident in cinematic adaptations, where the portrayal of events often diverges from historical reality, either to reduce production costs or to attract larger audiences through exaggeration and dramatization. Consequently, the film becomes a reference point for viewers, shaping their judgments about the accuracy or inaccuracy of information. Joanna Paul captures this dynamic succinctly: "[...] the reception theorist would argue that our viewing of *Troy* inevitably will affect our next reading of *The Iliad*" ⁽⁹⁾.

Thus, the film transforms into a repository of information from which the audience draws knowledge about history or the "Other." Due to the naivety of some viewers, filmmakers often exploit this trust, embedding misleading ideas into their works. These ideas are then adopted by audiences who increasingly treat cinema as both entertainment and a source of news, a shift driven

by the fast-paced nature of modern life, which has eroded habits such as reading and consulting reliable sources for information. This is further exacerbated by the alarming rates of illiteracy in the Arab world ⁽¹⁰⁾.

As a result, the film acquires a documentary authority, and for some, becomes infallible.

I-4. The Ideal Viewer

Umberto Eco discusses at length the concept of the *model reader* in his book *The Role of the Reader*, a notion that can be extended to film studies, albeit with a terminological shift. In certain cases, the viewer may even assume both roles, especially in films with overtly interpretive titles⁽¹²⁾.

Film theorists often refer to the cinematic work as a “text” - a term we won’t debate here - implying that the film is a tapestry of blank spaces filled by the viewer through their *cognitive baggage*, contextual knowledge, and stored information. The viewer connects scenes, inferring meanings that may only be hinted at in the film. This process presupposes a minimum level of cultural literacy; the uninformed or illiterate spectator is not part of this equation and certainly not the ideal viewer sought by filmmakers ⁽¹²⁾.

Filmmakers do not explicitly define their ideal viewer; rather, the viewer is shaped by the film’s impact. The ideal viewer may interpret the film in ways the creator never anticipated, not necessarily due to misreading, but because certain dimensions may have escaped the filmmaker’s attention. This recalls Paul Valéry’s famous assertion: “There is no true meaning of a text. No authority of the author. Whatever he intended to write, he wrote what he wrote. Once published, a text becomes like a device that anyone may use as they wish and according to their own means; it is not certain that the creator uses it better than others” ⁽¹³⁾.

The film, as a medium, conveys the creators’ messages to the viewer, but this does not mean the viewer can fully grasp the film’s intentionality (*le vouloir dire*). They may approximate it, intuit elements overlooked or deliberately omitted by the filmmakers, and engage with the film as a fertile ground for diverse interpretations.

When a film addresses viewers of this caliber, it becomes difficult to comprehend, as Eco notes in his discussion of texts: “[...] when a text refers to readers it did not anticipate and did not help produce, it becomes unreadable [...] or becomes a different book altogether” ⁽¹⁴⁾.

What applies to literature applies equally to film. Despite their differences, both share the capacity to generate infinite interpretations. The ideal viewer is essential for successful communication; the process remains incomplete unless the viewer fulfills their role by extracting the latent meanings embedded in the film, meanings left to the receiver’s culture and intellect. The film’s vividness evokes responses that static texts or images cannot, as Joanna Paul affirms: “The cinematic medium, by nature vivid and often exciting, is able to engage the spectator in a way that texts, or static images, may not” ⁽¹⁵⁾.

I-5. Viewer Segments and Motivations for Watching

Viewing habits and motivations vary from one individual to another and across age groups. For some, films serve as a refuge from reality, a moment of rest after a long and exhausting day, or a search for novelty amid monotonous routines. For others, cinema offers a sense of belonging, especially for those experiencing loneliness. In this way, the film acquires social and cultural

significance through its audience, which also makes it subject to censorship ⁽¹⁶⁾. The diversity of social groups and modes of thinking expands the consumer base, which filmmakers must ultimately satisfy.

Audiences are typically classified into two main categories ⁽¹⁷⁾:

- **Demographic segmentation:** This includes social groups based on class, gender, age, family structure, nationality, ethnicity, education, religion, political orientation, geographic region, and rural/urban background.
- **Psychographic segmentation:** This categorizes consumers according to their needs and desires.

Given the importance of films, cinema producers have commissioned specialists to conduct audience studies to better target and market their productions. Early research revealed that audiences are neither passive nor homogeneous, and that the effects of films are neither direct nor uniform. Viewers select films based on their social class (including age and gender), and the studies concluded that maximizing profit requires targeting specific segments.

Stuart Hall argues that the way we decode the information embedded in a text depends on our background and factors such as class, race, gender, age, social status, occupation, religion, experience, and beliefs, all of which shape our response, regardless of the producer's intended encoding ⁽¹⁸⁾.

Understanding a film's message - both its explicit and implicit dimensions - is contingent upon the viewer's cultural heritage and social environment, which together shape their worldview and reactions to external stimuli. Acceptance or rejection, submission or resistance, these are responses forged by the viewer's cultural background.

II. The Dilemma of Choosing Between Dubbing and Subtitling in Conveying the Cinematic Message

II-1. The Rise of Dubbing and Subtitling

“Anyone reading a translated book or watching a dubbed film will inevitably refer to the original text to verify what they suspect might be a mistranslation ... The subtitler, however, is in a weaker position, since the original is available for all to see and hear” ⁽¹⁹⁾.

Following the influx of American films into the European market, European countries were compelled to translate them, having failed to compete with the American film industry in terms of volume and quality, especially after the losses incurred during World War I. Translation was carried out through two main techniques: dubbing and subtitling, leading to a division between dubbing nations and subtitling nations.

Major non-Anglophone countries (France, Germany, Italy, Spain, etc.), despite the high costs of dubbing, insisted on preserving their identity and prestige, particularly as former colonial

powers. Subtitling was perceived as a flaw or even a disgrace. These nations preferred to maintain the illusion that films in their original language were incomprehensible, thereby reinforcing their cultural dominance. As Danan argues, the preference for dubbing is a deliberate attempt to conceal the foreignness of the film by creating the illusion that the actors speak the viewer's language, a firm assertion of the national language's cultural, economic, and political supremacy within national borders ⁽²⁰⁾.

Subtitling nations, on the other hand, are typically those with limited budgets, unable to afford dubbing for more than a hundred films per year. These include the Netherlands, Portugal, Wales, Finland, Poland, the Scandinavian countries, Greece, Slovenia, and others.

Some countries attempted to switch techniques, but audiences resisted, as in Poland during the 1990s, where efforts to replace voice-over dubbing with subtitling were met with public disapproval, prompting a return to traditional methods. Similarly, *Malcolm X* was initially subtitled in Parisian cinemas but was later dubbed in response to distributor demands, as French audiences were unaccustomed to hearing American English or reading subtitles at the bottom of the screen.

The Arab world can also be divided along similar lines. Subtitling countries include the Gulf states, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. Dubbing countries include Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. While these latter nations may not be fully dubbing-based, they generally do not screen films in their original (typically English) language, opting instead for French without subtitles, a legacy of prolonged French colonial rule, which ingrained the French language into daily life.

Unlike European countries, some Arab nations employ both techniques. Algerian satellite channels have recently aired American films in their original language with subtitles, a bold move, though previously tested with French-dubbed films. Algerian viewers, now accustomed to subtitled content via satellite, are unlikely to object.

In Morocco, Mexican films and series are dubbed into the Moroccan dialect. In Tunisia, foreign films and series are sometimes both dubbed and subtitled, or dubbed only. Syria has seen a recent boom in dubbing, particularly of Turkish series into the Syrian dialect. Lebanon, long known for its Arabic dubbing expertise, now dubs documentaries into Lebanese Arabic.

II-2. Stages of Subtitling in Cinema

Subtitlers typically work from and to written scripts, translating dialogue from a pre-produced screenplay ⁽²¹⁾. The final product is a list of subtitles, which are later integrated into the film by other specialists. In cinematic contexts, the subtitler's task is limited to producing a written translation of a scripted text, a process fraught with challenges in conveying meaning across languages and cultures. It often requires omissions in speech or visuals, or the addition of explanatory elements. Ideally, subtitling favors brevity, as image and sound help complete the intended meaning, and screen space remains limited regardless of its physical size.

Subtitles usually consist of two lines, each containing 60 to 70 characters, displayed on screen for five to six seconds. Their appearance must be synchronized with the original dialogue.

Despite the large size of cinema screens, which can sometimes mitigate the constraints of brevity imposed on subtitlers in other audiovisual media, reading speed varies among viewers. As a result, some may fail to read the full subtitles, causing parts of the translation to be lost.

This issue of reading speed has drawn attention from specialists, leading to the development of **teletext technology**, now integrated into modern television sets. Teletext allows viewers to choose their preferred subtitle mode:

- No subtitling;
- Fast, condensed subtitling;
- Normal-speed subtitling;
- Subtitling for slow readers;
- Pictogram-supported subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing;
- Subtitling in a domestic minority language;
- Source-language subtitling for foreign language learners ⁽²²⁾.

Unfortunately, teletext is not available in cinema halls, which increases the burden on subtitlers, who must accommodate diverse audiences and preferences without the benefit of adaptive technology ⁽²³⁾.

II-3. Advantages and Disadvantages

3.1. Dubbing

Advantages ⁽²⁴⁾:

- Dubbing is less condensed and more literal than subtitling, relying on established post-synchronization methods.
- It produces a more coherent discourse, being an oral translation of spoken text, which prevents viewers from being distracted by written subtitles.
- It does not require a high level of cultural or educational literacy, making foreign productions accessible to children and illiterate audiences.
- Synchronization issues arise mainly in close-up shots, and even then, only with visible mouth movements requiring alignment with speech and non-verbal sounds.

Disadvantages ⁽²⁵⁾:

- Dubbing is time-consuming: the text is first translated literally, then adapted to match voice, lip movements, and facial expressions.
- During recording, actors may alter expressions for artistic reasons.
- While technological advances have reduced dubbing time from three weeks to five days, this has also affected quality.
- Dubbing often sacrifices authenticity by replacing original voices with a limited pool of voice actors, creating a false sense of familiarity.
- As Fawcett notes, viewers of dubbed films remain aware of the foreign language and culture through mismatched visuals and gestures.

- Viewers are not easily deceived by familiar language when visuals reflect unfamiliar customs.
- Maintaining synchronization places a heavy burden on translators, who may omit unclear or culturally irrelevant elements.
- Dubbing deprives audiences of exposure to foreign languages, partly explaining higher English proficiency in subtitling countries.
- It excludes tourists who may not understand dubbed versions but could follow subtitled ones.
- Herbst observes that dubbed films in Germany often use overly formal vocabulary, unsuitable for casual conversation.
- In the Arab world, dubbing traditionally used Modern Standard Arabic, even when characters spoke informally, a mismatch that led to the adoption of widely understood dialects for dubbing.

3.2. Subtitling

Advantages ⁽²⁶⁾:

- Subtitling is cost-effective - ten to twenty times cheaper than dubbing - and faster to produce.
- It can be applied to any audiovisual format and supports multilingual presentation.
- It facilitates language learning and exposure to foreign speech.

Disadvantages ⁽²⁷⁾:

- It excludes children, the elderly, and illiterate viewers.
- It divides viewer attention between reading subtitles and watching visuals.
- It condenses spoken dialogue into written form, often omitting introductory phrases for brevity.
- Subtitling has contributed to the widespread understanding of English, potentially leading to its dominance.
- Gottlieb argues that anyone who can read subtitles likely understands English, a phenomenon he calls *Translation Zero*.
- While Gottlieb applies this to minorities, it arguably extends to all subtitling nations.
- For example, Arabic channels like MBC4 broadcast American programs live without subtitles, assuming viewers understand English.
- This trend may signal the decline of translation and the rise of English as a *lingua franca* in the Arab world.

A single country may employ both techniques. Mona Baker suggests subtitling for news, current affairs, educational and religious programs - where visuals are less critical - and dubbing for children's content, puppet shows, scientific and artistic programs, sports, major public events, entertainment, and drama, where immersion and accessibility are key.

III. Films Between Literal Fidelity and the Necessities of Adaptation and Interpretation

John Milton argues that translators working in adaptive contexts face constraints that shape their interpretive choices. Age groups, stylistic expectations, and informational content must be considered, especially in fields like children's literature, where Western standards dictate specific formal and thematic criteria. Target audiences also impose conditions regarding page count, genre, and format. Budgetary limitations play a decisive role in determining what is omitted or added, while linguistic differences (particularly between unrelated language families) often necessitate adaptation ⁽²⁸⁾.

III-1. Adaptation and Cinematic Translation

The advent of sound in cinema was hailed by audiences as a breakthrough, yet it posed significant challenges for filmmakers, especially in exporting films in their original language. In the silent era, viewers could universally interpret gestures and expressions. But with the emergence of spoken dialogue, comprehension became language-dependent. Filmmakers could no longer rely solely on modifying intertitles; every utterance now required translation. Subtitling emerged quickly, but some countries rejected the idea of reading on-screen text, leading to the rise of dubbing. Another solution was the *remake*, reshooting the same film in multiple languages, sometimes with the same actors, sometimes with different ones, and with cultural adjustments. However, this approach proved costly and inconsistent in quality, and translation (via dubbing or subtitling) regained prominence ⁽²⁹⁾.

Remakes represent both adaptation and translation. They require translating the screenplay and then adapting it to the target culture's values. While remakes were common in the 1930s and 1950s, the dynamic has since reversed: American production companies now remake Asian and European films to suit American cultural norms.

Egyptian cinema has recently adopted themes from American films, often mimicking realities far removed from Arab contexts. For example, *The Seventh Sense* is a localized version of *What Women Want*, itself a trivial film. In the original, a man gains the ability to read women's thoughts after an electric shock. Initially distressed, he consults a therapist who encourages him to exploit this gift. He uses it to undermine his boss and steal her ideas, but eventually falls for her and changes course ⁽³⁰⁾.

In *The Seventh Sense*, the protagonist is a young man aspiring to become a famous athlete. To win his matches, he consults a sorcerer who grants him telepathic powers. He uses this ability to defeat opponents and even challenges a world-renowned fighter. When his secret is exposed, he renounces the power and chooses to fight honorably, relying on his natural talent, ultimately triumphing through fairness rather than deceit.

American audiences may accept telepathy due to its prevalence in fantasy films and series, and their openness to *unconventional* beliefs. Moreover, Mel Gibson's character acquires his gift through a scientifically plausible event. In contrast, Arab societies often associate such powers with superstition and sorcery, portraying even educated characters as susceptible to irrational beliefs. Although the film's ending rejects these practices, their presence remains problematic ⁽³¹⁾.

Cinematic adaptation should ideally be a faithful transfer of essential textual elements into film. Translation, in this context, functions metaphorically, a simple shift in meaning from one language to another. Yet this simplicity masks the complexity of adaptation.

The relationship between translation and adaptation (with cinematic borrowing as one form) has long intrigued scholars. Some prefer to subsume adaptation under the broader term “translation.” Adaptation studies rarely engage with translation theory, as they stem from distinct fields (theater, music, cinema). However, some translation scholars have sought convergence, coining terms like *tradaptation*. Researchers like Gumbier use the term but downplay terminological debates, noting that clients increasingly favor “localization” and “adaptation” over “translation.” Translators must comply with consumer demands, prioritizing relevance over precision. This shift calls for a nuanced analysis of three core concepts in translation theory: **meaning**, **purpose**, and **intent**. Translation focuses on meaning; adaptation conveys the source text’s purpose; interpretation seeks to clarify the author’s intent ⁽³²⁾.

Ultimately, adaptation is inseparable from the translation process, regardless of strategy. Translating from a source to a target language inherently involves approximation and cultural adjustment, even when the translator deliberately opts for foreignization.

III-2. The Adaptive Translator (Dubber/Subtitler)

The audiovisual translator is the professional responsible for translating audiovisual content. Depending on the specific domain, this role assumes various titles ⁽³³⁾: *subtitler* (sous-titreur) for subtitling, *dubber* (doubleur) for dubbing, *audio describer* for descriptive narration, *revoicer* for added voice tracks, *surtitler* for live or theatrical subtitling, and *localizer* for video games and websites. However, specialists in audiovisual translation increasingly favor the term **adaptateur** (adapter), to avoid terminological confusion and to reflect the translator’s ability to work across all audiovisual formats ⁽³⁴⁾. Yves Gambier notably advocates this designation, rejecting narrower labels such as translator, subtitler, or dubber: “*He seems to reject the term ‘translator’ in favor of ‘adapter’*” ⁽³⁵⁾.

With the rise of digital technologies, translation has become a central component of audiovisual media, and translators have gained recognition as co-authors ⁽³⁶⁾. Their work involves interpreting foreign texts across diverse domains, requiring them to act as cultural mediators, translating not only language, but also the social realities, cultural frameworks, and historical contexts of the target audience. As Jean-Marc Laffore and Adriana Sarban affirm, the subtitler is not merely a technician but a liberator of civilizations, reflecting the knowledge, values, and epochs of entire societies ⁽³⁷⁾.

Cinematic translation is among the most demanding tasks in audiovisual translation due to its semiotic complexity. Each program has its own characteristics and requires a tailored approach, whether subtitling, dubbing, or voice-over. Digital tools have facilitated this work, enabling high-quality translations with greater efficiency ⁽³⁸⁾.

The audiovisual translator must consider the cultural dimensions of the message and empathize with the audience’s diversity, including age and health conditions. For instance, elderly viewers may struggle to follow both the original audio and the translated voice simultaneously, or to read fast-moving subtitles while watching the visuals. In contrast, younger or cognitively agile viewers can track subtitles and visuals with ease ⁽³⁹⁾.

One of the most pressing challenges for the adapter is navigating multiple linguistic registers. As Sarban and Laffore explain: “Among the obstacles faced by the subtitler is the presence of multiple linguistic levels within the same film, including archaic or colloquial language, youth slang, street vernacular, and even vulgar expressions such as insults and profanity” ⁽⁴⁰⁾.

To avoid alienating viewers, translators often opt for standardized language, avoiding colloquialisms in favor of Modern Standard Arabic, while remaining sensitive to cultural and historical references. This demands a high level of competence and familiarity with the constraints of on-screen translation, which include:

1. Linguistic Specificities ⁽⁴¹⁾:

- Phonetic nuances, rhythmic patterns, word order, and polysemy (multiple meanings) must be carefully managed.
- Translators must grasp both source and target language structures to preserve semantic integrity - prioritizing *meaning* over *form*.

2. Censorship in Audiovisual Translation ⁽⁴²⁾:

- Censorship is typically managed by professionals in the audiovisual field, many of whom are translators.
- It primarily affects subtitled films, where both original and translated versions are visible.
- In dubbed films, censorship is harder to detect without comparing to the original version.

Censorship operates on two levels:

- **Governmental Censorship ⁽⁴³⁾:** Each country enforces strict regulations on translated films to protect societal values and prevent external influence. Translators may be required to modify or omit content that conflicts with local norms, a practice that, while culturally sensitive, may compromise the principle of *scientific fidelity*. As Ali Mohamed Darwish states: “The translator must uphold scientific integrity. If assigned a task beyond their capacity, they should decline it with honesty and transparency.”
- **Self-Censorship ⁽⁴⁴⁾:** Translators may voluntarily adjust content to align with audience expectations or institutional guidelines. As Dr. Haseeb Elias Hadid notes: “Fidelity entails preserving an irreducible identity and ensuring continuity of communication despite linguistic diversity”.

From another perspective, scholars remain divided on the tension between fidelity and adaptation. Some argue that *infidelity* is inevitable, especially when countries impose cultural policies on foreign films. This is evident in animated films like *Mission Cleopatra*, *Astérix et Obélix*, *Shrek*, *The Emperor's New Groove*, and *Monsters*, where adaptive translator Bartosz Wierzbietka openly embraces creative freedom: “No one expects me to be faithful to the original. On the contrary, everyone expects linguistic innovation. I strive to preserve the meaning and emotional tone of the original, but how I achieve that is my own task. What matters is how many viewers enjoy the adapted version in cinemas. Thus, audience appeal becomes the decisive criterion” ⁽⁴⁵⁾.

III-3. Temporal and Spatial Constraints in Audiovisual Translation

Audiovisual translation is governed by typographic and temporal parameters such as character count, line length, subtitle placement and timing, and lip synchronization in dubbing⁽⁴⁶⁾. As George Díaz Cintas explains: “Visual synchronization is supposed to create the impression that the actors on screen are pronouncing the translated words”⁽⁴⁷⁾.

The translator’s ingenuity lies in resolving critical synchronization challenges. For instance, when translating from French to Arabic, the word *Salut* may be rendered as *Marhaban* (Hello), but this may not align with the speaker’s lip movements⁽⁴⁸⁾. A more effective solution would be to use *Salam*, which matches both the phonetic rhythm and cultural context. As noted: “It is more disturbing to see an open mouth from which no sound emerges than to hear a sound coming from a closed mouth”⁽⁴⁹⁾.

The translator’s beliefs, environment, skills, and cultural knowledge play a vital role in adaptation. Marie Héron outlines key requirements⁽⁵⁰⁾:

- **Competencies:** High proficiency in both languages, editorial skill, and the ability to analyze the relationship between text and image, with knowledge of cinematic adaptation techniques.
- **Qualities:** Research ability, precision, and awareness of the task’s complexity.

Hassan Youssef adds⁽⁵¹⁾:

- Full command of both source and target language rules, and deep cultural awareness.
- Thorough understanding of the subject matter.
- Broad general knowledge and intellectual curiosity.

The translator must adapt texts to the target culture, respecting its customs, religion, and environment. These factors place the adapter in a delicate position, requiring adherence to core translation principles such as fidelity and preservation of the original spirit⁽⁵²⁾.

In transferring content between languages, the adapter simplifies expressions, resolves terminological issues, and may alter scenes to accommodate temporal discrepancies between source and target texts. This requires careful decisions (such as omission or condensation) while preserving essential content and expressive features like speech and body language. As Justun Brien states: “A translator should never translate anything that fails to inspire them. There must be a sense of affinity between the translator and the material”⁽⁵³⁾.

Researchers in audiovisual translation recommend the following strategies⁽⁵⁴⁾:

- **Conciseness:** Subtitles must be reduced to two lines due to rapid display.
- **Clarification:** Adding explanatory information when needed.
- **Lexical simplification:** Using accessible, commonly understood terms and restructuring the text.
- **Addition and omission:** Inserting or removing words, or editing scenes during post-production.
- **Substitution:** Replacing terms with culturally appropriate equivalents.

Creative adaptation encompasses multiple linguistic operations. As Caroline Larminieu notes: “Adaptation is a concept that blends various linguistic processes such as imitation and complete reformulation of the original text” ⁽⁵⁵⁾.

Adaptation also involves sociolinguistic and cultural modifications ⁽⁵⁶⁾:

- Translating and adjusting linguistic and socio-cultural elements to recreate the original text’s impact in the target context.
- Employing explanatory techniques to clarify ambiguities and facilitate audience engagement.
- Producing subtitles with both linguistic and aesthetic appeal, as Rebecca McClarty affirms: “Beyond their usual role, creative subtitlers become translators capable of producing subtitles that are both linguistically and aesthetically satisfying” ⁽⁵⁷⁾.

Claude Lelouch emphasizes the shared responsibilities of dubbers and dialogue writers: “Both are mediators between two cultural systems; the original film and the dubbed version. Their challenge lies in reformulating the film’s message without betraying its meaning” ⁽⁵⁸⁾.

Translation is a form of creative expression in another language. Even synonymous terms may carry different emotional weights. Context determines the most appropriate equivalent, making translation far from a simple transfer. As Daniel Gile asserts: “Translation is not a mere conversion; it is a profoundly creative act; a dissemination of meaning through texts and discourses in society” ⁽⁵⁹⁾.

Gile also highlights the geopolitical dimension of language: “When translating texts from dominated cultures, the adapter tends toward localization. When translating texts from dominant cultures, they adopt a strategy of foreignization” ⁽⁶⁰⁾.

Conclusion

It becomes evident from the foregoing that both the translator and subtitler must function as adapters, capable of modifying or omitting segments to suit the target audience without introducing flaws or distortions. Digital technologies have emerged precisely to address the limitations previously encountered in audiovisual media; enabling adjustments to image and sound. Through these tools, the adapter can remove or replace unsuitable phrases without the viewer noticing, as digital editing allows for lip movement manipulation that creates the illusion of natural speech.

In adapting film texts, the translator may omit certain expressions deemed culturally inappropriate, aiming to protect the viewer from content that conflicts with local norms. However, this intervention is contested by those who view any alteration - however minor - as a breach of translational fidelity, arguing that all forms of translation are ultimately measured by their faithfulness to the original. Nonetheless, the translator's desire to mediate foreign cultures often necessitates adaptation to align with the target audience's values ⁽⁶¹⁾.

The adapter must also handle newly coined terms by either retaining them or providing explanatory glosses. Moreover, audiovisual translators routinely employ adaptation techniques in their practice, whether producing subtitled or dubbed versions. This process requires careful consideration of the following elements ⁽⁶²⁾:

- Constraints specific to the chosen translation mode (e.g., timing, visibility, lip-syncing)
- The spoken dialogue to be translated
- The accompanying visual content and its interplay with verbal elements
- The intended audience and their cultural and cognitive profile

Translation must reflect the scenario of the original work, not merely its words. It demands respect for the target language's structure, coherence, and stylistic clarity - avoiding redundancy (e.g., repeating the same information within five minutes). The adapter may assume multiple roles, engaging with the original work, its author, and its director.

Audiovisual translation is crafted for both sight and sound, and has evolved through technological innovation. In recorded formats, it is unacceptable to hear both the original and translated voices simultaneously, except in live broadcasts such as interviews or speeches. In pre-recorded content, the original voice must be muted after translation, allowing the dubbed voice to take over, while respecting the constraints of voice-over translation.

Ultimately, the competent translator is one who possesses strong monolingual skills -including listening, speaking, reading, and writing- enabling them to perform their task with precision and creativity ⁽⁶³⁾.

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