

SUBTITLES AND INTERNATIONAL ANGLIFICATION

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Is subtitling translation?

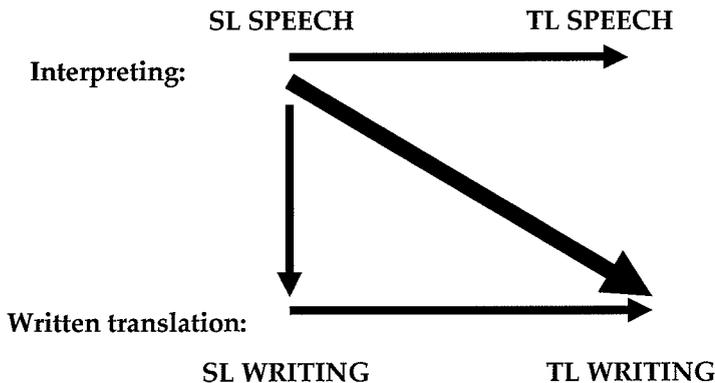
Language professionals tend to disagree as to whether subtitling is indeed translation, and even the subtitling industry is often reluctant to grant this type of language transfer the status of 'real' translation. This is mainly due to two things:

- 1) The famous and infamous time-and-space constraints of subtitling, which mean that no more than some 70 (alphanumeric) characters can be fitted into one subtitle, and that – in order to give viewers enough reading time – subtitles should be exposed at a pace not exceeding 12 characters per second. This normally implies some measure of *condensation* of the original dialogue, something that is often not expected in translated texts.
- 2) The fact that to most people the term 'translation' – or the equivalents 'traduction', 'Übersetzung', 'oversættelse', etc. – means 'the transfer of written text in one language into written text in another'.

I will suggest labeling all types of interlingual transfer 'translation', as they all share one basic quality: verbal messages are recreated in another language. However, a watershed runs between what I will call *isosemiotic translation* on the one hand, and *diasemiotic translation* on the other. Iso-semiotic translation uses the same semiotic channel – i.e. channel of expression – as the original, and thus renders speech as speech and writing as writing. This means that processes as diverse as conference interpreting, post-synchronization (= dubbing), technical translation and literary translation are all examples of isosemiotic translation. In contrast, diasemiotic translation crosses over from writing to speech, or – as in the

asemiomatic translation crosses over from writing to speech, or – as in the case of subtitling – from speech to writing.

As is seen below, the process of diasemiomatic translation is *diagonal*. Thus, subtitling – the only type of diasemiomatic translation found in the mass media – ‘jaywalks’ from source-language speech to target-language writing:



The realm of subtitling

Subtitling can be defined as “diasemiomatic translation in polysemiomatic media (including films, TV, video and DVD), in the form of one or more lines of written text presented on the screen in sync with the original dialogue”.¹

In most European speech communities with less than 25 million speakers, subtitling – costing only a fraction of lip-sync dubbing – has been the preferred type of screen translation ever since the introduction of sound film in the late 1920s.² Internationally, at least six different patterns of subtitling are found, with most subtitling countries adhering to only one of them:

- 1) *Subtitling from a foreign language into the domestic majority language:* Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Iceland, the Faroe Islands, the Netherlands, Portugal, Estonia, Slovenia, Croatia, Romania, Greece, Cyprus, Argentina, Brazil, etc.
- 2) *Bilingual subtitling (in cinemas) from a foreign language into two domestic languages:* Finland (Finnish and Swedish), Belgium (Flemish and French), Israel (Hebrew and Arabic).
- 3) *Subtitling from national minority languages into the majority language:* Ireland, Wales (English).
- 4) *Subtitling from the majority language into an immigrant language:* Israel (Russian).
- 5) *Subtitling from non-favored languages to the favored language:* South Africa and India (English).
- 6) *Revoicing foreign-language dialogue in the favored language, with subtitles in a non-favored domestic language:* Latvia (voice-over in Latvian, subtitles in Russian).

Dubbing vs. subtitling

Dubbing, the traditional rival of subtitling, long ago established itself as the dominant type of screen translation in all non-Anglophone major speech communities in Western Europe, i.e. Spain, Germany, Italy and France. Without entering the never-ending ‘dubbing vs. subtitling’ discussion,³ two central – and slightly paradoxical – facts need mentioning here:

- a) Subtitling, often considered the more authentic of the two methods, constitutes a fundamental break with the semiotic structure of sound film by re-introducing the translation mode of the silent movies, i.e. written signs.
- b) Dubbing, a “natural”, isosemiotic type of translation, generates a conglomerate expression in which the voices heard, severed as they are

from the faces and gestures seen on screen, will never create a fully natural impression. Only total remakes will be able to supplant the original film.

All in all, the two methods of screen translation differ in the following respects:

1. In semiotic terms, i.e. with regard to
 - (a) written vs. spoken language mode, and
 - (b) supplementary mode (subtitling) vs. substitutional mode (dubbing).
2. In wording, where
 - (c) to a great extent, subtitling is governed by the norms of the written language,⁴ and
 - (d) unlike dubbing, subtitling tends to condense the original dialogue by roughly one third,⁵ partly as a result of point 2c above, partly to provide enough reading time for the audience (cf. the constraints mentioned in the introduction).

Subtitling, a multi-talent task

Apart from being an excellent translator of foreign-language lines, a good subtitler needs the musical ears of an interpreter, the no-nonsense judgment of a news editor, and a designer's sense of esthetics. In addition, as most subtitlers do the electronic time-cueing themselves, the subtitler must also have the steady hand of a surgeon and the timing of a percussionist.

Furthermore, due to the diasemiotic nature of subtitling, the subtitler must, on top of translating spoken utterances from one language to another, transfer the dialogue from one sub-code (the seemingly unruly spoken language) to another (the more rigid written language). If this shift of sub-code were not performed as a fundamental part of the subtitling process, the audience would be taken aback by reading the oddities

of spoken discourse. But as the dialogue is always re-coded en route to the bottom of the screen, viewers only react if the other dimension of diagonal subtitling – the translation proper – seems imperfect.

But this happens often enough; double-guessing subtitlers is almost a national sport in semi-bilingual subtitling countries, and several websites are now dedicated to onscreen translation bloopers (see for instance the Danish “Bøfsiden” (= www1) and “Avigsidan” (www2) from Sweden). Naturally, many of the errors reported are inexcusably stupid – albeit very amusing. But at a more sophisticated level, the complex and polysemiotic nature of filmic media renders a simple textual comparison between subtitles and original dialogue insufficient for making quality judgments.

Instead, the synthesis of the four parallel semiotic channels – image, (non-verbal) sound, dialogue and subtitles – should be compared with the original three-channel discourse. Only then will it be possible to determine to which extent the subtitled version *as a whole* manages to convey the semantic gestalt of the original.

Anglophone programing, anglicized subtitles?

Film, TV and video are presently being digitized, leading to formats much better suited for special translation needs than the traditional one-translation-per-film entity. Already today, films on DVD are marketed in multi-language versions, with (in theory) up to 8 dubbed and 32 subtitled versions on one disc – although on most DVDs far less than half of these options are offered.⁶ With Digital Video Broadcasting (DVB), new standards for TV translation may (still) be expected (Karamitroglou 1999), making ‘personal subtitling’ – i.e. remote control selection of the preferred language version – a matter of course to most audiences worldwide.

However, as long as the bulk of the international exchange of films and TV productions remains anglophone, both subtitling and dubbing will

very likely keep projecting English language features from the original dialogue to the translated discourse.⁷ As things are, high frequencies of Anglicisms are found in both types of translation, as shown in recent German and Danish studies (Herbst 1994 & 1995, Gottlieb 1999 & 2001). And indeed, with the largely unchallenged power of Hollywood, although many subtitlers and language authorities may be critical to linguistic echoes of English in translated media, film companies, broadcasters and audiences worldwide tend to be more positive in this respect – one example being the increasing number of American film titles remaining untranslated in non-anglophone countries.

Interestingly, even when Anglicisms are concerned, subtitling differs from dubbing – in terms of which grammatical level is mainly affected. Dubbing tends to introduce *syntactic* ‘Trojan horses’ in target languages, primarily because the actors’ lip movements force dubbing translators to copy English speech patterns. Subtitling, on the other hand, typically promotes *lexical* innovation, i.e. loanwords, a more transparent Anglicism category. This is partly because viewers expect terminological similarity between what they hear and what they read on the screen (Gottlieb 2001).

For those concerned by these facts, there is little consolation in the alternatives:

- a) *Voice-over*, where the original soundtrack is overlaid with impassionate, sometimes English-flavored narration in the target language (Grigaričiūtė & Gottlieb 1999), with no way of checking the translation against the original,
- b) *No translation*, where the domestic language is not ‘contaminated’, but the audience is forced to make the best of their knowledge of English – a sink-or-swim strategy used in, for instance, several countries in Southern Africa (Kruger & Kruger 2001) – and, finally
- c) *English intralingual subtitles*, a method which may help viewers make sense of the spoken English lines, but still offers no interlingual aid.

At the end of the day, boosting domestic productions is the only way to ‘minimize the Anglicism problem’ – and produce dialogue with only those Anglicisms that are already firmly established.⁸ Avoiding all imports is as unrealistic as it is undesirable. Instead, more imports from non-anglophone speech communities would be beneficial to all parties involved.

Language politics and choice of screen translation method

Regarding program exchange and translation choices on television, six scenarios can be outlined, four of which exist today.⁹ The two supplementary ones, ‘Utopia’ and ‘Dystopia’, should be seen as opposite extremes establishing the cline on which all present and future realities are bound to be found:

Scenario 1: Utopia

The *cosmopolitan* situation:

Flourishing international program exchange,
less than 50% English programing,
less than 50% national programing,
a wide range of non-English imports,
standard imports *subtitled in all domestic languages*,
children’s imports dubbed or voiced-over

Scenario 2: Scandinavia

The *monolingual anglophile* situation:

Substantial program imports,
around 50% English programing,
almost 50% national programing,
very few non-English imports,
standard imports *subtitled in the dominant domestic language*,
children’s imports subtitled, dubbed or voiced-over

Scenario 3: **South Africa**

The *multilingual anglophile* situation:

Massive program imports,

more than 50% English programing,

less than 50% national programing,

very few non-English imports,

standard imports *not translated*,

children's imports either not translated or dubbed / voiced-over,

indigenous programs *subtitled in English*

Scenario 4: **France**

The *monolingual nationalist* situation:

Limited program imports,

less than 50% English programing,

more than 50% national programing,

very few non-English imports,

niche imports subtitled, all other imports *dubbed or voiced-over*

Scenario 5: **'Anglostan'** (the native English-speaking countries)

The *anglophone* situation:

Very few non-English imports,

almost 100% English programing,

niche imports subtitled, all other imports *dubbed or voiced-over*

Scenario 6: **Dystopia**

The *anglified* situation:

Very few non-English imports,

domestic and regional production mainly in English,

standard imports *not translated*,
programs for the elderly subtitled or dubbed

Judged from a global perspective, the only sustainable scenario seems to be the Utopian one, in which neither national nor anglophone productions dominate, and where different segments among viewers may select different language versions of imported programs.

If we want to, we have an all-win situation on our hands:

- a) Subtitling anglophone imports enhances the learning of English, still unchallenged as a global lingua franca.¹⁰
- b) Importing more programs from non-anglophone countries will raise viewers' linguistic and cultural awareness and help keep the dominance of English in check.
- c) Offering subtitles in all major indigenous languages will improve the status of so-called lesser-used languages and make program production in these languages viable.

Alas, as with so many other choices in life, consensus is easier reached than action, especially when money is concerned. Today, American, British and Australian imports are so much more affordable to TV stations worldwide than domestic productions – as long as these remain difficult to export because neighboring countries keep filling their shelves with anglophone imports.

Vicious or not, this circle needs to be broken, at least for the sake of linguistic and cultural diversity.

Notes

1. The term 'polysemiotic' refers to the presence of two or more parallel channels of discourse constituting the text in question. In a film, up to four semiotic channels are in operation simultaneously: non-verbal picture, written pictorial elements, dialogue, and music & effects.

2. On the history of subtitling, see Ivarsson & Carroll (1998: 9-32) and Gottlieb (2003, 25-34).
3. This issue is thoroughly dealt with in Koolstra et al. (2002). For a state-of-the-art survey of screen translation, see Díaz Cintas (2003).
4. The problems of rendering 'meaningful' deviations from standard speech in subtitling are discussed in Assis Rosa (2001).
5. Several European studies, most of them unpublished, point to a typical (quantitative) condensation rate of between 20 and 40 per cent, see for instance Lomheim (1999).
6. In Denmark, anglophone DVD productions with subtitles commissioned in the USA – although offering a wider variety of language versions – generally display a poorer subtitling quality than those commissioned in Denmark (with subtitles in the Nordic languages only), both in terms of idiomaticity, translational equivalence, reading times, and technical perfection (Witting Estrup 2002).
7. One of the earliest scholarly discussions of this problem referred to Finnish TV (Sajavaara 1991), thus demonstrating that the influence of English via screen translation is by no means limited to Indo-European languages.
8. Impressive documentation of the present European situation regarding English linguistic influence is found in Görlach (ed.) 2001, 2002a and 2002b.
9. Scenarios 2-5 are based on, among other sources, Danan (1995), Gottlieb (1996), and Kruger & Kruger (2001).
10. Even scholars adamantly against the international dominance of English recognize the need for improved English skills the world over (Phillipson 2003).

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Web sources

www1: www.titlevision.dk/boeuf.htm

www2: www.avigsidan.com