Audiovisual Translation (AVT) Is it a Translation or an Adaptation process?

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Abstract: The main aim of writing the article is to introduce the reader to audiovisual translation, subtitling, as of the most thriving areas within the wider discipline of Translation Studies. For many years ignored by academics and teachers alike, it has since the 1990s gained well-deserved visibility thanks to the proliferation and distribution of audiovisual materials in our society. The value of the image is of crucial importance in our daily lives and we are literally surrounded by screens of all shapes and sizes. Television sets, cinemas, computers, and mobile phones are a common and recurrent feature of our social environment, based on the power of the screen. We come across them at home, in our work place, on public transport, in libraries, bars, restaurants and cinemas. We spend a fair amount of hours watching screens and consuming audiovisual programmes to carry out our work, to develop and enhance our professional and academic careers, to enjoy ourselves and to obtain information. It would not be an exaggeration to talk about the ubiquity of the image in our time and age.

For some people, audiovisual tranlation falls short of being a case of translation proper because of all the spatial and temporal limitations. They prefer to talk about adaptation – an attitude that has stymied the debate about AVT and could be tainted as having been one of the main reasons why the whole area has been traditionally ignored by scholars in translation until very recently.Audiovisual programmes use two codes, image and sound, and whereas literature and poetry evoke, films represent and actualize a particular reality based on specific images that have been put together by a director. Thus, subtitling – dubbing and voice-over too – is constrained by the respect it owes to synchrony in these new translational parameters of image and sound (subtitles should not contradict what the characters are doing on screen), and time (i.e. the delivery of the translated message should coincide with that of the original speech). In addition, subtitles entail a change of mode from oral to written and resort frequently to the omission of lexical items from the original. As far as space is concerned, the dimensions of the actual screen are finite and the target text will have to accommodate to the width of the screen. Although the figures vary, this means that a subtitle will have some 32 to 41 characters per line in a maximum of two lines. These tend to be the main reasons put forward by those who have looked down on this activity, considering it as a type of adaptation rather than translation. It is indeed this attitude that can be held responsible "for the fact that translation studies of all disciplines have been rather reluctant to include film translation among their subjects of study. For others, this concept of adaptation seems to equate the process to a lesser activity and becomes enough of an excuse to carry out a linguistic transfer that is clearly inadequate but nonetheless justified since it is only a case of adaptation.

The Spanish scholar - Jakobson is often cited as being one of the first academics to open up the field of Audiovisual translation. He famously established three types of translation:

Intralingual or rewording, (it is used for the deaf and hard of hearing, for language learning purpose, for Karaoke effect, for dialects of the same language and for notices and announcements.

Interlingual (it is used for hearers and for the deaf and hard of hearing)[1]

Intersemiotic or transmutation.

Translation must be understood from a more flexible, heterogeneous and less static perspective, one that encompasses a broad set of empirical realities and acknowledges the ever-changing nature of practice. The term is probably better suited to give account of another professional practice, in the way the scientist and researcher Neves defines it. She uses the term:

"to refer to a subtitling solution that implies the translation of messages from different verbal and non-verbal acoustic codes into verbal and/or non-verbal visual codes; and the adaptation of such visual codes to the needs of people with hearing impairment so as to guarantee readability and thus greater accessibility". [2]

I believe, however, that the battle has now been won with regard to the nature of these practices and translation is perceived by most scholars as a more flexible and inclusive term, capable of accommodating new realities rather than disregarding practices, outdated notion of a term coined many centuries ago, when the cinema, the television and the computer had not yet been invented. Once we have accepted the tenet that we are indeed dealing with cases of translation, the following step is to end a generic term that can encompass all the different manifestations. Although this may sound an easy task, the fact is that the terminology used is very hesitant and can be confusing. The adjectives 'constrained' and 'subordinate' were regularly used when referring to this type of translation in publications during the 1980s and early 1990s, but began soon to receive criticism for their somewhat negative connotations. It was then that the term 'audiovisual 12 Introduction to Subtitling translation', abbreviated to AVT, appeared in academic circles. This coinage has the advantage of including the semiotic dimension, and has taken root to such an extent that today its use is quite frequent. However, despite its popularity, it is not the only term used and some scholars prefer other terms such as 'film translation' or 'cinema translation', but as the field of study spreads to other types of programmes – e.g. sitcoms, documentaries, cartoons, etc. – these concepts also become somewhat restricting. Other umbrella terms, all of them bringing in different nuances, are also in use. One that has caught on in English but not so much in other languages is 'screen translation', which strives to encompass all products distributed on screen, be it a television, movie or computer screen. This term opens the doors to the translation of other products that until now have failed to make it to a more stringent classification, such as computer games, web pages and CD-ROMs.

Another designation that is gaining ground is 'multimedia translation', to refer to those products where the message is broadcast through multiple media and channels.

This term blurs the boundaries even further and establishes a stronger link with the localization of software and the translation of programmes that are distributed on the Internet, as does the more recent 'multidimensional translation'.

This fluctuation in terms is no more than a reaction of the changing times in which we live. Far from representing a barrier to communication, it could be interpreted as a clear sign of the desire of many academics to maintain an open and flexible approach to our object of study; one that can assimilate and acknowledge the new realities emerging in the translation world.

[1] (1996) Word Play and Translation. Manchester: St Jerome.
[2] Neves, Josélia (2005) Audiovisual Translation: Subtitling for the Deaf and the Hard-of-Hearing. PhD Thesis. London: Roehampton University

Fortunately, enough, one of the terms, audiovisual translation (AVT), has been gaining ground in recent years and is fast becoming the standard referent. In its inception, AVT was used to encapsulate different translation practices used in the audiovisual media – cinema, television, VHS – in which there is a transfer from a source to a target language, which involves some form of interaction with sound and images.

Dubbing and subtitling are the most popular in the profession and the best known by audiences, but there are others such as voice-over, partial-dubbing, narration and interpreting. The translation of live performance was added to this taxonomy at a later stage and that is how surtitling for the opera and the theatre has also come to be included. New and innovative professional activities such as subtitling for the deaf and the hard-of-hearing and audio description for the blind and the partially sighted (AD) are also making a place for themselves within AVT. These new practices have brought in further terminological disarray, especially because of the fact that none of them, at the beginning at least, implied the transfer from a source to a target language, one of the traditionally defning features of any translation activity. Nevertheless, the majority of scholars and practitioners in our field have embraced SDH and AD as an integral part of AVT. The wider concept of accessibility has been put forward to help bridge any possible divides. In societies that aim at being more just and inclusive, accessibility has a social function and means making an audiovisual programme available to people that otherwise could not have access to it. In this sense, to lip-sync, to subtitle or to voice over a programme shares as much the idea of accessibility as SDH or AD. Only the intended audiences are different. Whether the hurdle is a language or a sensorial barrier, the aim of the translation process is exactly the same: to facilitate access to an otherwise hermetic source of information and entertainment. In this way, accessibility becomes a common denominator that underpins these practices.

Finally, computer games and interactive software programmes are taking subtitling to the borders between AVT and localization since these games travel not only subtitled, but also adapted to the cultural sensibilities of the target gamers. Likewise, subtitling is re-entering the domain of speech when summarizing techniques and interpreting are combined in teletext subtitling for the deaf and hearing impaired through voice recognition. These trends are representative of a broader move: different forms of audiovisual translation and other translation modes are converging, creating new hybrid forms and sometimes catering for very different and well-designed target audiences.

The key word for successful audiovisual translation is insight and understanding of the product and its expected function, combined with desire to learn and willingness to adapt. One main type of audiovisual translation that is being widely used nowadays is subtitling. Subtitling may be defined 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, graffti, inscriptions, placards, and the like), and the information that is contained on the soundtrack (songs, voices off). In some languages, like Japanese, cinema subtitles are presented vertically and tend to appear on the right-hand side of the screen. All subtitled programmes are made up of three main components: the spoken word, the image and the subtitles.

The interaction of these three components, along with the viewer's ability to read both the images and the written text at a particular speed, and the actual size of the screen, determine the basic characteristics of the audiovisual medium. Subtitles must appear in synchrony with the

image and dialogue, provide a semantically adequate account of the Source language dialogue, and remain displayed on screen long enough for the viewers to be able to read them.[3]

Different typologies of subtitles can be established depending on the criteria that are used at the onset. Subtitling has a very close relationship with technology and one of the main problems encountered when trying to come up with a fixed classifiation of subtitles is the speed at which technological developments take place. No sooner has one classification been made than new types of subtitles appear on the market. In an attempt to offer a comprehensive overview of the many different types of subtitles in existence, it has been decided to group them according to the following criteria: linguistic, time available for preparation, technical, methods of projection, and distribution format. All of these classification types are essential in the preparation process of subtitling. It can be concluded that the search to identify the types, classifications and the terms related to audiovisual translation has been continuing till the recent times and will be continuing for so long as the result in advance in technology and multimedia products..

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