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Film Translation, its types and difficulties

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Abstract: The objective of this paper is to demonstrate the great power of film translation. This aim is accomplished by presenting the major modes of film translation, their world distribution and history, which are then followed by an analysis of dubbing and subtitling from the perspective of domestication and foreignization

Keywords: Film translation, subtitling, dubbing, domestication, foreignisation, target culture, source culture

Introduction

Each country cultivates a different tradition of translating films and subscribes to one of the two major modes: dubbing and subtitling as far as cinema translation is concerned, or sometimes to a third, minor, mode—voiceover—in the case of television translation. The decision as to which film translation mode to choose is by no means arbitrary and stems from several factors, such as historical circumstances, traditions, the technique to which the audience is accustomed, the cost, as well as on the position of both the target and the source cultures in an international context. This paper will focus on cinema translation only, which is of course not to say that television translation is less worthy of academic investigation. On the contrary, analysis of television translation constitutes an excellent material for further research, and it is only disregarded here for reasons of clarity and lucidity of argumentation.

The first part of this paper sets out to present the above-mentioned translation modes and their world distribution, next trying to account for them from the perspective of history and culture. Subsequently, an attempt is made to show the enormous power that these modes exert on audiences and entire cultures. The paper aims to demonstrate that dubbing is a form of domestication whereas subtitling can be regarded as foreignisation.

There are two major types of film translation: dubbing and subtitling; each of them interferes with the original text to a different extent.

On the one hand, dubbing is known to be the method that modifies the source text to a large extent and thus makes it familiar to the target audience through domestication. It is the method in which "the foreign dialogue is adjusted to the mouth and movements of the actor in the film" and its aim is seen as making the audience feel as if they were listening to actors actually speaking the target language.

On the other hand, subtitling supplying a translation of the spoken source language dialogue into the target language in the form of synchronized captions usually at the bottom of the screen, is the form that alters the source text to the least possible extent and enables the target audience to experience the foreign and be aware of its "foreignness" at all times.

In Britain, film translation does not appear to be a significant issue as the great majority of imported films are American and require no translation.

First, there are the dubbing countries, and this group comprises mainly French-, Italian-German-, and Spanish-speaking countries (sometimes referred to as the FIGS group), both in and outside Europe. In these countries the overwhelming majority of films undergo the process of dubbing. This is mostly due to

historical reasons since "in the 1930s dubbing became the preferred mode of film translation in the world's big-market speech communities".

Second, there are the subtitled countries, which are characterised by a high percentage of imported films, and thus there is a great and steady demand for translation. Subtitling is preferred to dubbing in countries such as the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Greece, Slovenia, Croatia, Portugal and some non-European countries. In Belgium or Finland, where there are large communities speaking two languages, films are usually provided with double subtitles.

The last group, according to the Routledge Encyclopaedia, comprises voice-over countries—mostly those that cannot afford dubbing, e.g. Russia or Poland.

Such a division, however, seems to be a simplification as it does not differentiate between cinema and television translation. For example, Poland is listed as a voiceover country, whereas it mostly uses subtitling in the cinemas, except for some dubbed productions for children. Furthermore, in her article about linguistic transfer in Eastern Europe, Dries stresses different patterns between Eastern and Western Europe, especially a surprising preference for dubbing in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Hungary, despite its high cost.

On the whole, it can be stated that especially in Western European countries dubbing is preferred in larger and more affluent countries, which can expect high box office receipts, whereas subtitling is used in smaller ones, whose audiences comprise more restricted markets. The cost alone, however, does not define the choice of translation mode. It is history that can shed some light on the question.

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In the times of silent movies, translation was relatively easy to conduct: the so-called intertitles interrupted the source of a film every couple of minutes, so the target language titles could easily be translated and inserted in place of the original ones.

The problem arose with the appearance of 'talkies' in the late 1920s. At first, American film companies tried to solve it by producing the same film (using the same set and scenario, but different directors and actors) in various language versions. However, this soon turned out to be unprofitable, as the films produced were of poor artistic quality and they did not win over the public. The studios that had been built in France for this purpose began to produce dubbed versions of films instead (see Danan 1991: 607). Iwasaki Akira, a Marxist critic, found talkies "anti-internationalistic" because of the way the national character of films was emphasised by the sound (see Nornes 1999). The new invention "enabled Hollywood to avoid any interruption in its dominance of the international film market" (ibidem). Talkies guaranteed that the audience was very much aware of the source culture and its nature, and thus they helped cement Hollywood's leading position.

The introduction of talkies exerted a far-reaching influence on both larger and smaller countries. As film production costs rose, it became increasingly difficult for smaller countries to export their productions and—limited by their small domestic markets—their home production decreased, which led to a rise in film imports. As for the larger European countries, they "were better equipped to continue producing their own films, but were also faced with powerful American competition". This situation, i.e. the wide gap between larger and smaller countries, was to be reflected later in the choice of the film translation mode: larger countries tended to dub

imported foreign productions, while smaller ones settled on subtitling.

From the early 1930s until early 1950s American film companies reigned over the entire movie industry as they monopolised the recording equipment. During World War II the American film industry flourished, and as a result, in the period following the war "European countries were easily flooded with new films as well as with the 2500 backlogged American movies produced during the war". It took some time for European economies to recover, and in the 1950s larger states, such as France, Italy, Germany and Spain, introduced protective measures aimed at lessening the influence of American films in their territories. For instance, import quotas were imposed in order to protect domestic production, and special taxes were levied on imported films in some countries (France, Italy) which required that "profits by American companies had to be reinvested locally". At the same time, domestic production in France, Italy, Germany and Spain was supported by the government through various subsidies and loans. By that time it was clear that film had become an extremely influential and profitable medium and everyone wanted to get the largest possible slice of the "film cake."

The table below shows that smaller European countries were producing fewer films than larger countries, and importing a host of both American and European films. As for the larger countries, protective policies introduced by their governments resulted in an increase in domestic film production and a decrease in foreign (mainly American) films importation. These policies also generally improved the domestic/imported films ratio in larger countries.

What follows is a brief account of the historical factors that influenced the choice of the film translation mode in some European countries.

Translation is often regarded with suspicion because it inevitably domesticates foreign texts, inscribing them with linguistic and cultural values that are intelligible to specific domestic constituencies. This process

of inscription operates at every stage in the production, circulation, and reception of the translation. It is initiated by the very choice of a foreign text to translate, always an exclusion of other foreign texts and literatures, which answers to particular domestic interests. It continues most forcefully in the development of a translation strategy that rewrites the foreign text in domestic dialects and discourses, always a choice of certain domestic values to the exclusion of others. And it is further complicated by the diverse forms in which the translation is published, reviewed, read, and taught, producing cultural and political effects that vary with different institutional contexts and social positions.

Dubbed films may frequently appear to the viewer to be brand-new products rather than transformed ones; a dubbed film ceases to be a 'foreign' film in order to become just a film. "In the international marketplace the film original thus functions as a transnational decultured product; it becomes the raw material that is to be re-inscribed into the different cultural contexts of the consumer nations through the use of dubbing". As has already been established above, audiences which are accustomed to dubbing, when hearing their own language feel reassured as to its importance "wychodząc z bezceremonialnego założenia, że 'cały świat' mywi po francusku czy angielsku". Thus, dubbing decreases the sense of 'otherness' and is an excellent example of domestication.

Dubbing can also be perceived as "an assertion of the supremacy of the national language and its unchallenged political, economic and cultural power within the nation's boundaries". By implementing policies, governments of dubbing countries stressed the importance of the existence of one standardised national language, often banning the use of dialects in order to strengthen the national unity. For example, in Italy, where the process of country unification was completed only in 1870, there were still many regions in 1920s and 1930s in which only local dialects were spoken, while modern Italian was virtually a foreign language. Mussolini ruled that all the imported movies had to be in standard Italian,

which made the cinema a major means of imposing a national language.

Among all kinds of film translation, dubbing is the one that interferes the most in the structure of the original. Many critics raise objections as to its authenticity. In principle, dubbing is considered by some to be less authentic than subtitling because "the original performance is altered by the addition of a different voice". The unity of the soundtrack inevitably undergoes reprocessing and it is more difficult for the viewer to believe and trust the new voices of—often very famous—actors. Therefore, in many dubbing countries, e.g. in Italy, some dubbing actors are used consistently with a particular actor. This, in turn, may lead to insuperable problems, as was in the case of one Italian dubbing artist who dubbed the voices of both Robert De Niro and Al Pacino for a number of years until the two actors met on the set of *Heat* in 1995. For obvious reasons, another actor was needed to substitute for one of the stars. This, however, did not satisfy Italian audiences, who felt there was something wrong with Pacino's voice as it was not what they were used to hearing.

Amongst the major methods of translating films, subtitling involves the least interference with the original; in other words, it is the most neutral, minimally mediated method. Therefore, it is subtitling that contributes to experiencing the flavour of the foreign language, its mood and the sense of a different culture more than any other translation mode. This is mainly due to the fact that the original soundtrack and dialogues are not tampered with, as is the case in dubbing. Moreover, "hearing the real voices of the characters not only facilitates understanding in terms of the specific dialogue or plot structure, but gives vital clues to status, class and relationship". Although there are significant cuts in the length of the dialogues due to the intrinsic nature of subtitling, much of what is lost can be compensated for while hearing the original.

Subtitling is becoming a preferred mode of translation not only owing to financial considerations—it is much cheaper to satisfy

the expanding needs of film markets by providing subtitles, which are more economical and easier to produce—but also because "to viewers in subtitling countries, the economic advantages are secondary; retaining the authenticity of the original production is paramount". For these viewers, 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.

Films can be a tremendously influential and extremely powerful vehicle for transferring values, ideas and information. Different cultures are presented not only verbally but also visually and aurally, as film is a polysemiotic medium that transfers meaning through several channels, such as picture, dialogue and music. Items which used to be culture-specific tend to spread and encroach upon other cultures. The choice of film translation mode largely contributes to the reception of a source language film in a target culture.

On balance, there is no universal and good-for-all mode of translating films. As was stated above, the methods are dependent upon various factors, such as history, tradition of translating films in a given country, various audience-related factors, the type of film to be rendered, as well as financial resources available. What is also of primary importance here is the mutual relationship between the source and target cultures, as it will also profoundly influence the translating process. All things considered, the two major translation modes, i.e. dubbing and subtitling, can be said to occupy the two opposite ends of the domestication-foreignisation continuum. As it was shown in this article, dubbing is a domesticating strategy which neutralises foreign elements of the source text and thus privileges the target culture. In contrast, subtitling is an example of a foreignising strategy since it stresses the foreign nature of a film and it is a source-culture-bound translation. It is clear that translated material can be domesticated or foreignised to different

extents, and hence be placed somewhere along the domestication-foreignisation continuum.

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