

Exploring the values of film script translation

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This paper endeavours to analyse the function and effectiveness of the translation process as applied to the relatively new genres of dubbing and subtitling. It must be admitted that modern translation theory cannot be applied in its present state to translating a script for the purpose of dubbing or subtitling. The non-textual nature of film implies that a different approach should be adopted in converting the Source Script into the target language. Conventional text translation evolves through a series of stages which in the most part focus on the linguistic structure of the source text and the interpretation of the subtext (Fig. 1). Film translation, on the other hand, is centred on converting the extralinguistic reality of the Source Script into an appropriate written or verbal form in the Target Language. This extralinguistic reality, while not entirely removed from a textual discipline draws essentially on the Source culture manifested in its various forms throughout the film, whether through setting, plot, characterisation, or the form in which the spoken language itself is presented.

Figure 1

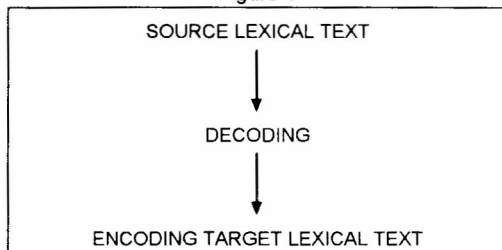
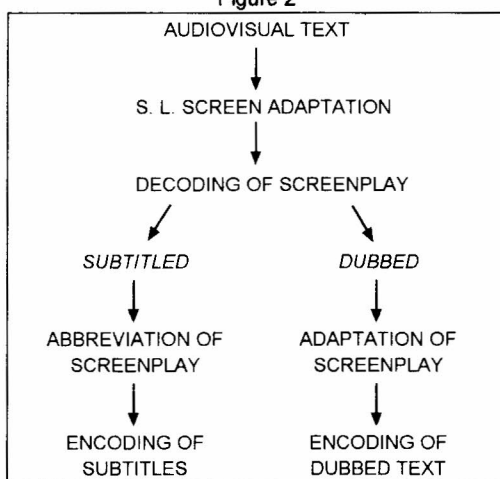


Figure 2



In Figure 2 we can see that the elaboration of a film from a script can in itself be considered a form of translation in the widest sense, as it undergoes a transformation process. The reconversion of this film into another written form as in subtitling, or another soundtrack, as in dubbing, might consequently be viewed as an adaptation or approximation rather than a translation.

Translation for both dubbing and subtitling therefore involves the merging of both linguistic and metalinguistic factors which include temporal, spatial and dialectic considerations, all of which are determined by the nature of the film itself, and the demands of the Target Language Audience (TLA). As a result, the role of the translator may be undermined, particularly in the case of the dubbed script. The commercial nature of the dubbing process, particularly in the case of English to-Spanish translations, ensures that the final product is orientated towards Target Language Audience appreciation rather than to preserving the originality of the Source Script and its inherent cultural manifestations. The needs of the TLA must be taken into account if the film is to be successful in its translated form, therefore the translator gives priority to two main functions: firstly, the translated script must produce an equivalent effect on the TLA, and secondly, the dubbed version must be synchronised as closely as possible with the mouth movements of the original actors, to ensure comfortable and credible viewing.

According to Mildred Larson, "The best translation is the one which (a) uses the normal language forms of the receptor language, (b) communicates, as much as possible, to the receptor language speakers that same meaning that was understood by the speakers of the source language, and (c) maintains the dynamics of the original source language text. Maintaining the dynamics of the original source text means that the translation is presented in such a way that it will, hopefully, evoke the same response as the source text attempted to evoke".

It is enlightening to apply a modified version of this definition of equivalent effect to film translation and dubbing. In order to achieve dynamic equivalence in dubbing, it is not always possible to "maintain the dynamics" of the Source Script without considerable modification to the translation. Because dubbing is restricted by visual phonetics and time limits, changes in word order, additional syllabification or explicitation may result in visual and timing incompatibility. For this reason it is common to neutralise source language words or phrases which do not have a target-language equivalent of equal or shorter length, and compensate with a sentence which may be unrelated to what is said in the original film.

This is usually the case when dubbing humour. The object of the exercise is to produce an equivalent effect on the TLA rather than remain faithful to the Source Script. A famous example of a necessary deviation from the Source Script was in the TV3 translation into Catalan of the British comedy series "Fawlty Towers". Modification of the original script was necessary in order not to offend viewers in Catalonia when the blunders and mishaps of Manuel, a somewhat clumsy Spanish waiter, were attributed to the fact that he was from Barcelona. In the dubbed Catalan version, Manuel was from Mexico. Had the TV3 translator opted to maintain the source version, it is unlikely that the series would have achieved such popularity among Catalan viewers.

Therefore if the target viewer does not laugh, then the translation has failed as far as translating comedy is concerned. Given the fact that a joke, when literally or approximately translated, usually does not produce the intended effect, a replacement may have to be sought. In the 1986 film "Aliens", for example, such a replacement brought about a complete transformation of the original line:

SPEAKER	O	D
Superior Officer	Any questions?	¿Alguna pregunta?
Hudson	Sir, how can I get out of this chicken-shit outfit?	¿No hay una cabina por aquí para llamar a mi mamá?

From this example it is obvious that the translator need not go to such lengths to maintain the dynamics of the Source Script. Rather than disregard the Source Script entirely, a closer and visually compatible option could have been chosen.

The priority given to visual compatibility and synchronisation have unfortunately led to the use of non-equivalents or false cognates in Spanish which in reality are mistranslations. Some common examples are as follows:

O	D
Don't mention it.	No lo menciones.
Does it sound familiar?	¿Te suena familiar?
Exciting.	Excitante.
A leopard can't change its spots.	Un leopardo no cambia sus manchas.

Frequent mistranslation may produce serious consequences on the Spanish language, as it can lead to the creation of discordant neologisms in the spoken form. Considering the majority of films shown in Spain are of English language origin, consistent mistranslations may result in the contamination of the Spanish language rather than the preservation of it.

A tension clearly exists between source and target language, especially in transferring culture-specific references and non-standard register. In conventional text translation, it is acceptable to include explicitation or footnotes where a close target-language equivalent does not exist. However, as explicitation tends to lengthen the translation, it will not conform with the timing restrictions of the dubbing process and so is an inappropriate solution. The use of a cultural equivalent may not necessarily strike the same chord both in source and target languages, nor carry the same implications or intended reactions. "Afternoon tea", for example, is not the same as "la merienda".

Nevertheless the translator frequently resorts to the use of semantic equivalence, particularly when there is a greater gap between the source and target-language cultures. In other words, dialect and idelect-

orientated Source Scripts, when translated and eventually dubbed, will be represented in the Target Script by standard register. A classic example of this is the typical western movie, which in English is characterised by accent and also by a unique stock of clichés and metaphors. When dubbed, the films lose these individual characteristics which English speakers would normally associate with them, and instead they acquire a neutral, non-associative language in the translation. Another more contemporary example of semantic equivalence as a form of translation has emerged in translating culture-bound English-language films of Australian, British and Irish origin. The influence of the United States on Spanish language and culture, as well as the well-established norms for translating American English, permit a relatively trouble-free translation of non-culture orientated American films. In the case of culture-bound films, norms do not readily exist for translating culture-specific terms and references, and so a considerable distortion of the original script can be expected in the dubbing process.

In the first place, the local accents which characterise these films are neutralised, thereby eliminating an element which creates local colour. Secondly, this neutralisation of accent also implies the loss of other aspects of local colour which are vital in understanding the nature of the film. Sociolect, for example, usually denoted by colloquial register and words and expressions unique to a certain region or social class, is replaced by standardised dialect in the target language.

This occurs in the dubbed Spanish version of the 1990 British film "Shirley Valentine", a female monologue set in working-class Birmingham. The film's sociolect is characterised in the original version by accent, colloquialisms, ellipses and grammatical errors which play an important part in creating humour and developing the characters, but which have not been substituted by equivalents in the Target Script:

SPEAKER	O	D
Joe	Have you finally gone round the frigg'in' pipe?	¿Supongo que te has vuelto loca de remate?

	O	D
Milandra	She's a mare	Es una burra.

	O	D
Shirley	Honest!	¡Algo casual!

From these examples it is clear that dubbing is not an accurate or faithful form of translation. It is in effect a form of adapted, approximated or perhaps constrained translation, the Target Script being distorted inevitably by the internal limitations of timing, synchronisation and cultural and linguistic inequivalencies, and the usual external pressures of deadlines and review facilities. In film translation, therefore, the translator's intention to produce a faithful replica of the original version is in many ways overshadowed by elements that are not immediately obvious to the unfamiliar eye.

As with dubbing, translating a film for subtitles is hindered by the nature of the technique itself. Although the original film remains intact, and thus maintains its authenticity, subtitling tends to place an extra strain on the viewer's concentration: over-frequent subtitles will cause comprehension difficulties for the Target Language Audience, while an inadequate frequency may imply the withholding of information or omission of Source Script dialogue. The viewing of information may not be synchronised or compatible with the screen action and so may undermine the intended equivalent effect.

Timing, line-length and the quality of the subtitles themselves are therefore vital in facilitating target viewing. On average, the maximum length of a subtitle is thirty-three to thirty-six typed spaces with a maximum appearance of six seconds. In rapid conversation, for example, a line may be allowed a two-second appearance, while this may be extended in a slower dialogue progression. It is this factor which has proved a linguistic stumbling-block in the translation process. The translator is obliged to conform with these imposed limitations and the result may not be a translation, but a synopsis of what is said in the Source Script. The priority of the translator tends in this case towards economy of words rather than accuracy. This may result in erroneous translations, as can be seen in these examples:

(All examples of subtitling have been selected from the films of Pedro Almodóvar)

	O	S
Pepa	Por simple curiosidad, ¿se puede saber de qué se me acusa?	What am I charged with?

(From "Mujeres...")

	O	S
Tina	Y la gente como tú, capaz de pegar una mujer indefensa. ¿qué es lo que merece?	People like you shouldn't hit a defenceless woman.

(From "La ley del deseo" / "Law of Desire")

Subtitling, like dubbing, clearly does not allow for expansion or explicitation in cases where they might be required. While in dubbing the absence of the original soundtrack allows the translator to neutralise and compensate, this is not the case in subtitling. The absence of the need for phonetic equivalence may be thought to alleviate the difficulties of the translation process and allow more freedom to the translator, but the fact that the original soundtrack can be heard and possibly understood implies that the translator must remain as faithful as possible to the original. Furthermore, the subtitled text is the result of a shift in the mode of discourse: the Source Script oral convention, which is characterised by intonation, pace and pauses, can only be approximated in the Target Script written mode by use of symbols and punctuation. Even in this case it is essential to control the flow of information in order to ensure comfortable viewing. However, should the translator neglect the spoken register of the Source Script, it may inadvertently neutralise the film's cultural background.

In translating culture-specific terms in subtitling, the translator is limited. Cultural references can be considered a form of secondary information: they are not essential to the plot, but to the ambientation and creation of identity in the film. For this reason, many subtitled Spanish films lose their cultural identity in the translated version. It is customary to neutralise references to food, places, or customs, as these require explicitation. However, where there is a visual item to support this reference, it is possible to maintain the original Spanish word without translating. These examples demonstrate how references to food could have been maintained:

O	S
Un plato de lentejas.	A bowl of soup.

("Pepi, Luci, Bom...")

O	S
¿Quieres pipas?	Want some?

O	S
¿Cuánto es el turrón?	How much is that?

("¡Átame!")

Including such references would thereby contribute to the ambientation of the subtitled version and the expansion of the viewer's knowledge rather than suppress the original cultural information.

Linked with socio-cultural elements are socio-linguistic factors. Frequent standardisation of language in the Target Script presents an incomplete and deformed image of the source language as spoken by each individual character. In the 1984 film "¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?" the idiolect which characterises the grandmother is an interesting example. Her idiolect is composed of both rural and urban influences. The religious sayings and superstitions of her village form a complete contrast to the Cheli influences of post-Franco Madrid. At one moment she speaks as any contemporary of her generation would, while at other times she tends towards colloquialisms uncommon for a person of her age. The subtitled version does not convey this change in register to the same extent:

	O	S
Abuela	¡Ay! ¡Que relámpago! ¡Santa Bárbara bendita! ¡Santa Bárbara bendita y el amor de la Cruz!	What terrible lightning! Let's take cover! The Holy Ghost and the Cross protect us.

	O	S
Abuela	Abuela ¡Ay! ¡Cómo flipo con las burbujas! ¿A tí no te enrollan?	The bubbles give me a kick. Don't they you?

The idiolect reference to "Blessed Saint Barbara" is standardised, while the frequently used verbs "flipar" and "enrollar" are merged. Cheli, the language which originated in the early 1980's 'movida' of Madrid has permeated conversational registers of the Spanish language, giving new meanings to standard lexis. While these are readily understood by native and proficient non-native speakers, it is not always possible to find an accurate one-word target-language equivalent. The translation of Cheli not only involves the transposition of linguistic elements, but also implies the reflecting of a new phenomenon in the Target Script. The absence of

such a phenomenon in the target language culture results in the non-existence of a parallel register:

	O	S
Toni	Si hay una movida*, no quiero saber nada ¿eh? Que soy un chinorri.	I know nothing. I'm a kid.
Cristal	Sí, chinorri. ¿No tienes tú años de calle?	A kid? You've been around

(¿Qué he hecho yo...)

This is one of the main difficulties in translating the films of Pedro Almodóvar, whose characters were among the first to use Cheli, expletives and taboo language in Spanish cinema. The use of such language was not intended to shock the target audience, but to convey the new freedom of expression in their society.

In translation, however, the shock value of such language must be taken into consideration. Expressions which originally contained sexual or sexist overtones in Spanish have now acquired an almost neutral status due to their frequent usage by natives. This may not be true of their English-speaking counterparts, and so a literal translation of taboo language may unintentionally shock the viewer, especially if the translation is to be read rather than heard. Therefore, the sensitivities of the viewer and the censor must be respected if the film is to attract a large audience.

Spanish films when subtitled into English tend towards a neutralisation or euphemisation of taboo language:

	O	S
Antonio	No sé qué coño* hace tu vecina Juani, que cada vez que se sube en el ascensor, lo jode.**	Every time your neighbour Juani gets in the lift, it jams.

(¿Qué he hecho yo...)

While this may be necessary to assist in the film's commercial promotion, the absence of such language also results in the elimination of character clues. In "¿Qué he hecho yo...?" the character of Juani is a case in point: the biting irreverent words of this Andalusian produce a shock effect on the Source Audience as she touches particularly on religious taboos. The translator should therefore have attempted to produce an equivalent effect.

	O	S
Juani	¡Me cago en los cáncomos de la sepultura del Señor!	God Almighty!

Taboo language originates in corresponding social and religious customs and so is culture bound. Translating such language for cinema depends on the existence of parallel taboos in the target culture. Film translation, because of the immediacy involved, is more comparable to the interpreting process than to text translation, and so may justify the translator's decision to omit or euphemise the Source Script rather than transpose it onto a Target Script cultural equivalent, especially when the source linguistic item is linked to character development.

In conclusion, it can be said that the values of film script translation are based essentially on the functional needs of the Target Audience rather than the demands made by the Source Script. A film's success is no longer determined by its artistic value, but by its financial potential. Any element of the Source Script which may detract from this potential risks being eliminated where the visual cue permits, and compensated with a modified or completely transformed Target Script version. As a result, the translated script is frequently not a reproduction of the original, but an adaptation based on target language cultural values, formulated with the intention of appealing to censors and attracting a large audience. When the audience is unaware that they are viewing a translation, then the translation is considered a success.

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