



Documentary films translation: approaches and challenges

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Journal for Educators, Teachers and Trainers, Vol. 14 (3)

<https://jett.labosfor.com/>

Date of reception: 06 Feb 2023

Date of revision: 15 Mar 2023

Date of acceptance: 08 Apr 2023

Elena V. Aleksandrova, Svetlana Y. Rubtsova, Maria N. Morozova, Ivan V. Grigoriev, Svetlana V. Ovcharova, Yuriy N. Pinyagin (2023). Documentary films translation: approaches and challenges. *Journal for Educators, Teachers and Trainers*, Vol. 14(3). 275-281.

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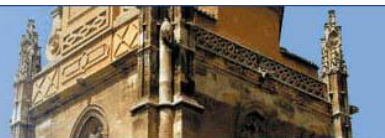
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ABSTRACT

The article presents a comprehensive overview of different approaches to translating documentary audiovisual productions. The abundance of documentary films available at online platforms lead to a higher demand for their translation into different languages as the modern tradition in viewing audiovisual content online requires a variety of language choice and modes of translation presentation (subtitling, voice-over, accessibility means for people with auditory and visual challenges). Documentary productions present a separate group of films that can be further classified according to their production methods and the presentation styles. The specificity of each item of the detailed classification calls for an individualized approach to handling the process of translating these productions. Film terminology also requires special attention as it is one of the basic challenges of documentary productions translation.

Keywords: Audiovisual translation, documentary films, genre, style, audiovisual production analysis, subtitling, voice-over, SDH, audio description, audio introduction.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, there has been an increased interest to the research of the process of audiovisual translation, as this type of translation is gaining demand. This is due to the rapid development of international media, the appearance of a huge number of TV series and films of foreign production from different countries. The presence of several semiotic levels in an audiovisual text makes audiovisual translation not only one of the most difficult types of translation, but also the most promising field of translation studies.

There is a large number of audiovisual productions of different genres, but this paper will focus on documentary films and series in all the variety of this genre. Documentary film is a special direction in cinematography that is based on shooting objective reality, authentic events and persons. The birth of this genre occurred at the same time as the Lumiere brothers' cinematography, as most of the films presented at their screening in 1895 were documentaries.

Documentaries are easily accessible to the average viewer nowadays than they used to be a decade ago, as before the advent of OTT platforms one had to make do with what was shown on television. At the same time, with the expanse of OTT platforms providing a big variety of documentary productions for all tastes the demand for skilled audiovisual translators in this field is also growing.

More and more often one can see documentaries in cinemas and at various international film festivals. Once seemingly dull and monotonous, the genre of documentary films now attracts millions of viewers around the world. This type of production is now no inferior to the feature film in drama and its ability to be spectacular. Using a variety of creative and technological approaches, as well as fascinating stories about acute, sometimes controversial topics, documentary films draw the audience into the context of the realities shown on the screen.

But despite the growing popularity of documentary films and the diversity of their genres, there is not much research dealing directly with the translation of non-fiction films.

Audiovisual translation as an independent field of translation theory began to form later than other translation theories. However, due to the spread and great popularity of cinematography, this type of translation is becoming more and more demanded. Audio-visual translation is a special challenge even for professional translators because it has certain peculiarities. One of the main features of this type of translation is the fact that the viewer gets information through two channels simultaneously - the audio and visual channels. This is why the translator of audiovisual production needs skills for working with the text of the production as well as with audio and video presentation.

There are two basic types of audiovisual translation: interlingual and intralingual. Interlingual translation includes: translation for voice-over, translation for two-dimensional subtitling, translation for dubbing (recast) and translation for full dubbing. In turn, the intralingual type of audiovisual translation can include subtitling for the hearing-impaired, live captioning, subtitling in opera and theater. Audio description, verbal narration of the information conveyed via visual channel, refers to the intersemiotic type of translation. The main objectives of audiovisual translation are to preserve the original intent of the production, to observe the style and peculiarities of the characters' speech.

2. Hypothesis

Every genre of audiovisual production requires a separate approach to handling the translation as each of them displays certain specificity of verbal modes (abundance of dialogues in feature films, monologues or descriptions in documentaries, etc), a peculiar visual structure and a separate type of audio.

There is a great number of genres in documentary productions. The classification that reflects the variety of the documentary audiovisual productions would include the following types:

- a chronicle, e.g. *Triumph of the Will* by Leni Riefenstahl (1935), *Citizenfour* by Laura Poitras (2014);
- an ethnographic film (anthropological film), e.g. *The Hunters* by John Marshall (1957);
- a film essay/ a film diary, e.g. *F for Fake* by Orson Wells (1973);
- an investigation, e.g. *The Act of Killing* by Joshua Oppenheimer (2012);
- an observation, e.g. *Primary* by Robert Drew (1960);
- a portrait, e.g. *Grizzly Man* by Werner Herzog (2005);
- experimental documentary, e.g. *Chelsea Girls* by Andy Warhol (1966);
- documentary animation, e.g. *On Stars and Men* by Faith and John Hubley (1964);
- docufiction, e.g. *I Clowns/ The Clowns* by Federico Fellini (1970);
- mockumentary, e.g. *Forgotten Silver* by Costa Botes and Peter Jackson (1995).

B. Nichols, an American film critic and theorist, states there are six basic styles of documentary films:

- poetic (the goal of such productions is to create a mood and convey an aesthetic);
- expository (educational and enlightening films);
- participatory (these films are characterized by the direct involvement of the documentary filmmaker);
- observational (the aim of such films is to reflect reality, without the documentary filmmaker interfering in the process);
- reflective (the main focus of such films is the relationship between the documentary filmmaker and the audience);
- performative (in such films the socio-political or historical reality is shown through the prism of the documentary filmmaker's personal experience).

According to Nichols, most documentaries incorporate several styles. Nichols believes that it is by combining and exploring different styles that one can take a different look at the world of non-fiction and perhaps find his style in the process. All of this, according to Nichols, contributes to the creation of stylistically coherent pictures [Nichols, 2010].

The genre and the style taken together create the unique documentary production that requires specific analysis in order to provide high-quality audiovisual translation with reference to different groups of potential recipients. One of the peculiarities of documentary filmmaking is the abundance of terminology, realities and concepts describing a particular event or phenomenon, which requires a particularly accurate translation, so, ensuring terminological unity provides a high quality of the translation itself. In order to systematize the selection of equivalents and to ensure the unity of terminology in translation, the translator needs to compile a professional glossary. In a language, the meaning of the same word can often be conveyed by different words or phrases, which can differ significantly in meaning. It is worth noting that in some cases, particularly in industry translation, it is especially important to use the specific meaning of the term and avoid any variations, because an incorrectly chosen term can lead to distortion of information. Thus, creating a professional terminological glossary is a vital part of the translation process.

3. Methods

The methods applied in this article to documentary films analysis include, the following:

- descriptive method for analyzing linguistic facts (in processing terminology);
- pre-translation analysis method;
- comparative method;
- random sampling method.

4. Main body

E. Franco believes that documentary translation has not received enough attention for two reasons. The first reason is the well-established literary tradition, which has certainly influenced audiovisual translation researchers to favor feature films. Secondly, according to Franco, many researchers perceive documentary film translation as a simple and ingenuous activity based on the translation of facts that traditionally claim to be objective and lack sophisticated literary language [Franco, 1998: 235].

In the pre-production and post-production stages of making documentary films their creators add to it the meanings and contexts that they find meaningful and necessary. Thus, the translator working with documentaries should treat them the same way as they would treat feature films.

In general, translating documentary productions is a very long and complex process that requires a thorough pre-translation analysis. In this regard, the translator needs to use all available tools that will facilitate and speed up the translation process.

The documentary film genre deals with a huge variety of topics, and this prompts the translator not only to do detailed research of topics the production covers, but also to study the terminological units of various specialized fields. This means that the translator, usually not specializing in a particular field, has to be able to find all the information necessary to understand the documentary and translate it adequately. They must also remember that terms are complex lexical units that acquire different specialized meanings depending on the conditions of the discourse [Matamala, 2009: 112].

A. Matamala in her article *Translating documentaries: from Neanderthals to the Supernanny* highlights that the important factors to take into consideration are adapting the length of the text (voice-over isochrony), synchronizing text and body language (kinetic synchrony), synchronizing text and visuals (action synchrony), and rephrasing the language to create a comprehensible discourse which nonetheless retains the register. [Matamala, 2009b].

Isochrony (voice-over isochrony) is a key requirement for voice-over translation. Despite the fact that voice-over is not as strict as full dubbing with lip synchronization, the original and translation must still take approximately the same amount of time.

Kinetic synchrony implies the correspondence between the translated text and the speaker's body movements on the screen .

Dynamic synchrony implies the correspondence between the text of the translation and what is happening on the screen in general. For example, if the speaker in a film lists some elements which are shown on the screen in turn, then the translator should keep the original sequence of these elements in the translation as well [Franco, Matamala, Orero, 2010].

The following parameters determine the comfortable perception of sounding speech:

- as an auditory stimulus speech is perceived only when its speed does not exceed 2.5 words per second;
- as a source of meaningful content, speech is perceived only when, firstly, the phrases pronounced without pauses do not exceed 5-6 seconds and, secondly, when the phrase consists of no more than 8-13 words;
- an average person perceives only 70% of the total amount of statements (auditory aspect) and understands 60% of them (the semantic aspect).

The following conclusions can be made about the sounding text of popular science:

- since a popular science text is created to communicate some objective facts that the listener understands in the process of perception, the rate of speech in the spoken form of a popular science text cannot be very high;
- for the same reason, the density of information in a text perceived by the ear should not be very high, which means that one should not overuse complex syntactic structures.

The audio track with the translated text is recorded over the original one. In most cases a few seconds of the original cue is left before the beginning of the translation cue so that the viewer can hear the beginning of the original text [Orero, 2009]. There is no common opinion on this matter, as some experts believe that it is not necessary to leave a few seconds of original speech at the beginning and at the end of the line. In practice one can encounter any of these options.

In subtitling, not only the verbal narration is translated, but also the verbal visual narration: main titles, road signs, signboards, headlines, etc. are introduced into the translation.

Since there are comparatively few restrictions in voice-over translation compared to dubbing and subtitling, the translation will be done faster than if another type of translation was chosen. This means that the voice recording stage can be started sooner. Since the lines are read out without acting, the recording process is also faster as fewer takes are required. The editing phase also takes less time.

It is evident from the mentioned requirements to the voice-over translation that this type of translation has both positive and negative features. Mentioned below are the following advantages of the voice-over narration:

- minimum number of restrictions;
- can be performed in a shorter time than dubbing;
- more budget-friendly in terms of the expenditures incurred.

Unfortunately, in addition to these advantages, voice-over translation also has disadvantages that stem from its distinctive features. For example, unemotional voice, which shortens the time it takes to prepare a translated film for release, leads to the actor's voice sounding not only neutral, but detached and even lifeless. Such a perceptual difficulty can cause the viewer to lose interest. Moreover, the film risks losing its value as a piece of art, regardless of whether the film is of an artistic nature or not.

Subtitling and voice-over translation have their own disadvantages if viewed in terms of different target groups with hearing or sight impairments. The disadvantage of subtitling is its inaccessibility to people with visual impairments. For example, the blind and visually impaired may encounter certain problems when watching a movie with subtitled translation. Unlike subtitles, the voice-over gives them the opportunity to hear the translation of the film. For the deaf and hearing-impaired people reading is the best option for perception of information, so, subtitling for the deaf-and-hard-of hearing (SDH) is appropriate for them. Audio description, verbal narration of the visual content of the documentary productions, could greatly benefit these films with reference to different target audiences including not only people with sight impairments but also those with autism spectrum disorders and other cognitive challenges. Another means of providing accessibility – audio introduction, or the verbal introduction to the documentary production, often provided for the blind and sight-impaired people – can enlighten the viewer as to some elements of the film that might require additional explanation.

Another important aspect to take into consideration when working on documentary audiovisual productions translation is the translation of terms used in the production. Despite the fact that there are different ways to translate terms, one should not forget that any term should be regarded as a word that can change its meaning depending on the field in which it is used. In English, terms (like other lexical units) are characterized by multiple meanings. One and the same term can have a different meaning within different sciences. In particular, this applies to interbranch polysemy when terms conditioned by certain conceptual systems acquire different highly specialized meanings. This phenomenon can be characterized as homonymy or polysemy.

Below are the examples of subtopic distribution of terms extracted from scripts of two documentary series about crime. Though it might seem that the topic of crime could supposedly be equally represented in the terminology used in the series, the diagrams below show the variety and difference of the subtopics in these productions.

Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes is a documentary series by Joe Berlinger about one of America's most ruthless serial killers of the 1970s. The series is based on archival footage and audio recordings, as well as a series of interviews with the inmate. The documentary series contains legal and medical terms, state and local government vocabulary, and the most famous names of serial killers in American history.

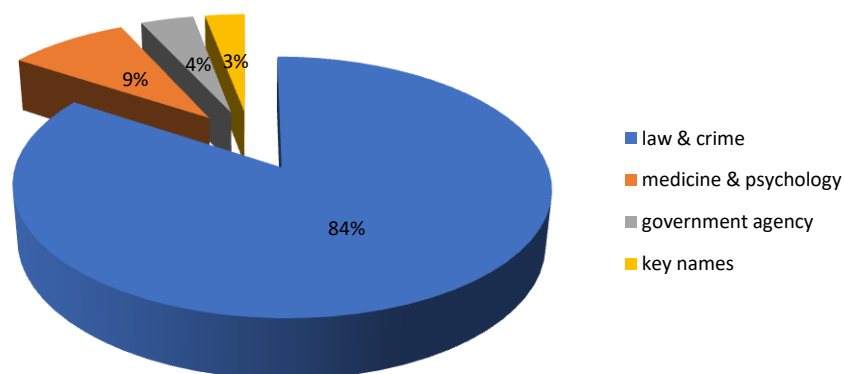


Diagram 1: Terminology distribution in Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes

The Business of Drugs is a series that tells the story of such an area of the criminal world as the drug business. In the series, a former CIA analyst tries to understand the origins and true influence of this side of the black market by examining six illegal substances from an economic perspective. The series features many terms directly related to the drug business, chemistry and economics.

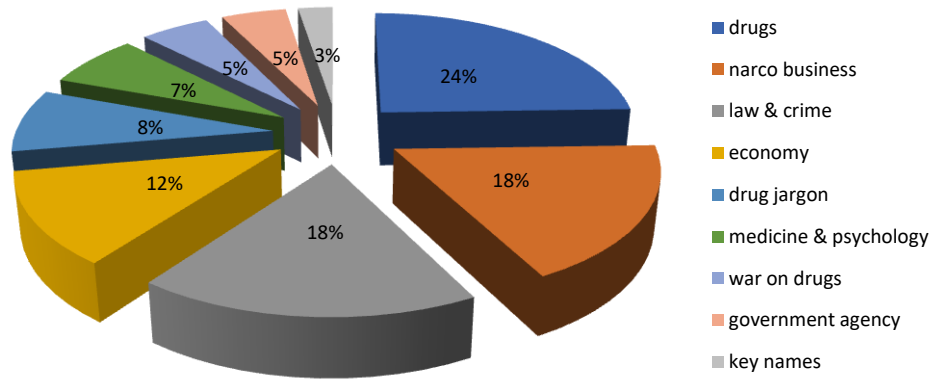


Diagram 2: Terminology distribution in The Business of Drugs

Some terms from the mentioned productions have no equivalents in many languages and require special effort on the part of the translator in terms of analyzing and choosing a vocabulary unit that could perform a similar semantic function in the translated text. Another challenge would be for the translator to apply the restrictions of different audiovisual translation types (subtitling, voice-over, SDH, audio description, audio introduction) to the vocabulary unit chosen as it might turn out too long for the subtitle, inadequately sounding for the voice-over, ambiguous for audio description, etc.). For example, a coroner is an official, usually in the Anglo-Saxon legal family, who investigates deaths that occur suddenly and under unusual circumstances. In many legal systems there is no equivalent of this position. In some countries, the tasks similar to the coroner's are performed by a number of bodies, such as the forensic medical examination, the preliminary investigation, and the court. Therefore, the term is sometimes best translated by transliteration, as often selecting an analogue will not fully correspond to its meaning, and a descriptive translation of the term will take too much space in the subtitle or too much time in the recording.

A translation glossary properly compiled (preferably, applying tools of automation) also makes it possible to study and describe the terms in the source language that have no analogues in the target language due to their novelty. Moreover, terminological units in a certain context can take on an entirely different meaning than the one presented in the commonly used dictionaries. Making a glossary is a complex and time-consuming process. Glossaries can be monolingual, bilingual and multilingual. They may also include necessary comments, explanations, examples of the use of words in context. A glossary minimizes inaccuracies in the translation of specialized terminology and increases the quality of translation by ensuring uniformity of the terminological units used.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Due to globalization and the spread of foreign film production, audiovisual translation is becoming one of the most prioritized areas of study. Audiovisual translation requires the translator to combine skills, abilities and theoretical foundations of different scientific disciplines and professions. Translation of audiovisual productions as contrasted to other types of translation differs in its specific perception as the viewer receives information through two channels - visual and acoustic ones.

As an object of linguistic research, documentary film poses certain difficulties, as it is a rather complex system, for the understanding of which it is necessary to study not only the text itself, but also the extra-linguistic factors contained in it. Since documentaries deal with a huge variety of topics, a thorough pre-translation analysis is needed to translate them. A translator needs to carry out detailed research on different specific topics, study terminology from different specialized fields, and be able to find all the information necessary to adequately convey what is happening in the documentary film production through different types of audiovisual translation or their combination. Documentary productions translation is a complex process that involves processing different kinds of material as well as learning about the subject matter of a particular film. A translator needs to

correctly adapt the translation for a specific audience, understand the subject matter of the film, understand the narrowly defined concepts and ensure the unity of the terminology of the production.

Documentary productions are an essential element of contemporary culture. Documentary genre has specific features that distinguishes it from feature films. The main difference is that the documentaries are based on real events and facts. Therefore, the translator working with the genre also need to maintain the authenticity and truthfulness of all the facts. Documentary filmmaking, as well as fiction filmmaking, has evolved over the years into different types, such as newsreel, film essay, observation, film portrait, etc. It is worth noting that each of the types of documentary film presuppose a different degree of artistry, hence a different approach to its translation.

Glossaries are necessary in documentary audiovisual translation to ensure the unity of terminology and to prevent possible translation mistakes.

Conflict of Interests

The authors confirm that the presented data does not contain any conflicts of interest.

Acknowledgments

The reported study was conducted within the independent research and development project No 122060900067-7

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