

Neves, Josélia. 2007. "Subtitling Brazilian Telenovelas for Portuguese Deaf Audiences: An Action Research Project". In Franco, Eliana & Vera Santiago. *TRADTERM 13. Revista do Centro Interdepartamental de Tradução e Terminologia FFLCH/USP*. São Paulo: Humanitas. pp.121-134. ISSN0104-693X.

Subtitling Brazilian Telenovelas for Portuguese Deaf¹ Audiences: An Action Research Project.

Josélia Neves

Escola Superior de Tecnologia e Gestão do Instituto Politécnico de Leiria (Portugal)

SDH Subtitling for the Deaf and HoH was first introduced on Portuguese commercial television in 2003, with the offer of teletext subtitling on the Brazilian telenovela *Mulheres Apaixonadas*. This would be done within an Action Research project which would bring together researchers, practitioners, providers and the Deaf community in a joint effort to find a suitable subtitling solution for the Portuguese context.

Even though, at first sight, such subtitles could be considered straight forward intralingual subtitling, it proved to be an instance of intercultural transfer and an opportunity to question many of the premises of tradition intralinguistic SDH, given that the mediation in case meant taking a Brazilian audiovisual text into Portuguese written subtitles for a Deaf audience who read such subtitles as their second language.

A Legendagem para Surdos foi introduzida na televisão privada portuguesa em 2003, com a oferta de legendas em teletexto na telenovela brasileira *Mulheres Apaixonadas*. Tal aconteceu no contexto de um projecto de Investigação-acção, que juntou investigadores, profissionais, televisões e a comunidade Surda, num esforço conjunto para encontrar uma solução que se adequasse às necessidades portuguesas.

Embora, à primeira vista, se pudesse considerar tais legendas do tipo intralinguístico, verificou-se que se estava perante transferência intercultural e que aquela seria uma boa oportunidade para questionar as premissas da legendagem para surdos tradicional, na medida em que se procurava transmitir um texto audiovisual brasileiro, através de legendas em português continental para um público Surdo que as lia como sua segunda língua.

Keywords:

Legendagem para Surdos / Investigação-Acção / Legendagem intralinguística / Legendagem Intercultural / Tradaptação

SDH / Action Research / Intralingual subtitling / Intercultural subtitling / Transadaptation

Portugal and Brazil are known to share a history, a culture and a language. Despite their common past, these two countries have grown to have an identity of their own and are now equally known for their differences. Whereas, in the past, Brazil fed on the European culture, it is now Portugal that is influenced by the culture that comes from across the ocean particularly in the form of telenovelas that, ever since the 70s, have populated Portuguese television and the imagery of its people.

When, in 2003, the opportunity came to subtitle a Brazilian telenovela for hearing impaired Portuguese audiences, it came as no surprise. At the time, all television channels were fighting for shares and thanks to its contract with *Rede Globo*, SIC (*Sociedade Independente de Comunicação, SA*), provided its spectators with four telenovelas which covered the best of the afternoon and evening slots. Among these, and running at prime time, Walter Avancini's *Mulheres Apaixonadas* (2003) had gained the heart of many and ranked among the top 10 most viewed programmes, only to be surpassed by football matches, news bulletins and reality shows. The offer of subtitling for the Deaf and hard-of-hearing (SDH) on *Mulheres Apaixonadas* would come to be a signpost in the history of SDH in Portugal and, in many respects, a turning point for the thousands of Portuguese hearing impaired² for, even though the public television channel RTP (*Radio Televisão Portuguesa*) had been offering closed subtitles since 1999, such subtitles had never really taken the needs of these particular audiences into account.

The context

The *Mulheres Apaixonadas* project, as it would come to be known, came about as the happy confluence of circumstances that were used to advantage in the form of a Collaborative Action Research endeavour.

At a European level, 2003 was devoted to raising awareness towards the needs of people with disabilities and to improving their conditions at all levels. The term “accessibility” became widely used and changes became visible in all quarters. Portugal, associated itself to the European Year for the Disabled by promoting multiple conferences and events and by bringing related topics to the media on a regular basis. On a practical note this meant that the disabled gained visibility and their associations gained lobbying force. The Portuguese Deaf, among others, took advantage of the occasion by calling for greater accessibility to audiovisual texts and strongly demanded an increase in the quantity and quality of teletext subtitling and of sign language on television. Their efforts were taken into account in August 2003 when, within the context of deep changes in broadcasting policies for the public broadcaster RTP (then called *Rádio Televisão Portuguesa* and since known as *Radio e Televisão de Portugal*), the three main terrestrial television operators (RTP, SIC and TVI) signed an agreement – “Novas Opções para o Audiovisual”³ – in which the commercial broadcasters, SIC and TVI, agreed to offer a minimum of 2 hours 30 minutes per week of sign language interpreting on news, entertainment, educational or cultural programmes, between 8 p.m. and 12 p.m.. Furthermore, these

commercial operators agreed to offer 5 hours per week of SDH, using teletext, on fictional programmes or documentaries. These forms of “public service” were negotiated over commercial interests that came with the limitation of publicity in the state owned television channels (“RTP” and “a 2:”). Broadcasters were given 90 days to set these new services in motion, which meant that, by December 2003, the hearing impaired in Portugal were to be offered the best conditions ever in the history of Portuguese television.

The fact that Portugal had, up until then, no tradition in SDH, allowed broadcasters to make choices between using traditional subtitling methods (open interlingual subtitles for all) and providing new subtitling solutions which would obviously mean calling on the work of qualified subtitlers in the field, which were non-existent at the time in Portugal.

In the course of 2003, and within the dynamics of a PhD research project on SDH⁴, the various stakeholders of SDH in Portugal became aware that much needed to be done if the Deaf were to be catered for on Portuguese television. It seemed appropriate from the beginning to bring together the different agents in the process, in the light of Vermeer’s *Skopos Theorie* (2000 [1989]) if we were to provide a service that would be truly useful to those who use it. By addressing each of the agents involved – the broadcasters, the subtitlers and the Deaf – it became clear that the problems, the needs and interests of each party were different and that all the parties would benefit from a better understanding of the other. A close analysis of the results of the various studies that were conducted during the first half of 2003 (Neves 2005) showed that:

- The only broadcaster that provided closed captioning (RTP) was not aware of the needs and tastes of its deaf audiences. The quantity, the quality and the choice of subtitled programmes didn’t meet with the approval of their intended audiences.
- The subtitles that were being provided (via teletext) were being done in the light of conventional open subtitles (for hearers).
- The subtitlers doing the job were not qualified and had no special training in SDH.
- The broadcasters who had never provided SDH were equally unaware of the special needs of their deaf audiences.
- The Deaf were not watching programmes with SDH or PSL on RTP because they didn’t know the services were available and the time at which they were shown or the types of programmes containing SDH or PSL didn’t meet their interest.

- The Deaf were not aware that they could have a “different” subtitling solution to that which they were used to.

The different actions that were carried out to get an understanding of the preliminary norms (Toury 1995) for SDH in Portugal served the double purpose of allowing for a comprehensive description of the situation and for raising awareness and creating the need for change. In fact, they had paved the way for the *Mulheres Apaixonadas* project that would bring together a broadcaster, subtitlers in the business, subtitler trainees, a teacher and researcher and the Deaf Community itself⁵. Even though with different goals from the start, all participants would work towards the same aim: the provision of adequate SDH solutions on Portuguese television. By abiding by the principles of Collaborative Action Research (CAR), “participation, collaboration, empowerment, knowledge and social change” (Seymour-Rolls & Hughes 2000), all partners came into the process with the conviction that their contribution was valuable to the others and that only by coming together could their different aims be achieved. In spite of all, not all the participants were aware that they were embarking in a process of action research, which, according to Reason and Bradbury (2001:1), is

...a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview which we believe is emerging at this historical moment. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.

In fact, only the researcher was initially aware of the implications of such an approach, taking on the role of initiator and organiser, playing intermediary between all parties, leading all those involved towards reflexive action and collaborative interaction. This meant that the researcher would take on different roles in her interaction with the participants. At times, as happened with the broadcaster, the researcher was seen as an external advisor, somebody who could help to find a solution to a new problem. In the case of the professional subtitlers and the trainees, the researcher was seen as a peer worker, trying out new solutions and working within the contingencies of professional subtitling in Portugal. For the Deaf community, the researcher was initially an outsider, a hearer who wanted to learn more about the Deaf as a social minority, but later she was to be admitted as one of the group, someone fighting for the improvement of their daily life. In theory, the plan had all the ingredients to be a unique opportunity to approach the subject of research, SDH, both from the outside and from the inside. In practice, the experience proved to be far more enriching than had been initially envisaged and the outcomes would go far beyond the time span and the sphere of the *Mulheres Apaixonadas* project. Those that were “invited” to take part soon started action research cycles of their own, researching into their own problems whilst finding a solution for them. This led initially less participant partners

to become highly involved and the generative power that derived thereof resulted in a number of other projects that are still on-going and that have grown an entity of their own.

The project

The *Mulheres Apaixonadas* project began in September 2003 when, in order to comply with their agreement, SIC accepted the challenge to try out a new subtitling approach in their offer of SDH. Up until then, SIC had never provided SDH and even though the quality of their open subtitling had always been known for its high quality, none of the people working on subtitling for this broadcaster had ever worked on SDH or had ever had any training in the field. In fact, at the time, in Portugal, only a small group of students had been introduced to this particular activity as part of their initial training as Translators⁶. However, professional subtitlers showed themselves available to help setting up SDH on SIC and to learn from the experience that was to take place. In the course of time, the Deaf community had also come to show an interest in taking part in the development of new subtitling solutions that might truly cater for their needs. In short, the possibility to join forces and to make the most of everybody's assets made it possible to set up a functional dynamics that turned out to be very enriching for all the agents involved: the television provider, professional subtitlers and subtitlers-to-be and the Deaf community. Each of the partners had an important role in the action research project and managed to interact with a constructive attitude. Further to the technicians that worked towards setting up SDH at the broadcaster, the project counted with the work of three professional subtitlers, ten trainees finishing their degree in Translation at ESTG, the researcher, who had previously been teaching audiovisual translation to the students in case, and over 50 Deaf collaborators who followed the whole process and interacted whenever it was found adequate.

The whole project was conducted within the framework of actual subtitling practices in Portugal. In other words, research was to be carried out while actually doing "the real thing". This project, which lasted for three months, divided itself into 3 main cycles. A first cycle was dedicated to a preliminary phase in which basic norms were devised as a theoretical and functional starting point. This phase included the analysis of various guidelines in use throughout Europe, the enquiry to the Deaf community as to their needs and expectations and the establishment of functional routines of interaction between all collaborators and particularly

between the subtitlers and the television broadcaster. A methodology was agreed upon so as to guarantee continual interaction between all participants. Given that the work group was physically based in a different region from that of fellow partners – the trainees were in Leiria, the broadcaster and professional translators in Lisbon and the Deaf community scattered all over the country –, communication lines were established at three levels. An open channel was found in the use of e-mail messages that proved to be the most efficient way to overcome physical distance; periodic meetings were arranged so as to guarantee face-to-face interaction among key elements from each group; and formal forums, as was the case of two conferences, were set up to address the issues in some depth.

This first cycle was rather short and intense and had its focal point in a closed circuit broadcast in which the whole subtitle preparation and broadcasting process was tested. This was carried out via the 888 teletext page, which would come to be used regularly, and was carefully followed by the researcher, trainees and a monitoring group of Deaf people. While the subtitled programme was being aired, a group of Deaf viewers was simultaneously watched and monitored so that subtle reactions might be registered and analysed. After the show, an informal meeting was held to analyse the outcomes, and decisions were made as to changes to the basic principles that were to underlie the rest of the work. A second and longer cycle then developed, which was to last for about two months and in which smaller sub-cycles were to take place. Each trainee enacted various individual cycles as difficulties were encountered. For instance, finding solutions for culturally bound linguistic elements meant research into bibliography, on-line resources, and the consultation of Brazilian Portuguese native speakers was often seen as the most valuable resource. Methodologies and outcomes would always be shared with the rest of the group, both for greater awareness of the implications of language transfer between Brazilian and European Portuguese, and for the sake of overall coherence, for more than 50 episodes were being subtitled by 10 different people. Trainees monitored their own work as well as that of their colleagues and questions and findings were presented during the weekly meeting in which teacher/trainer/researcher and trainees decided upon subtitling solutions and changes to be made. Every time a problem appeared, a sub-cycle of AR would be started, in a systematic process. Research was carried out in various fronts. Whenever available, theoretical works were read and relevant information was interwoven with the practical solutions. Other qualitative and

quantitative studies were carried out to validate hypotheses and, in the end, theoretical generalisations were drawn in the form of a proposal for guidelines for future use. In all, these experiences proved to be, as McKay & Marshall (1999:599) puts it, “a mechanism for practical problem solving and for generating and testing theory”.

Throughout this process bonds were nurtured and strengthened with the Deaf community. The trainee subtitlers started learning Portuguese Sign Language to gain access to their receivers' environment in the knowledge that, to quote Stringer (1999:204): “we come closer to the reality of other people's experience and, in the process, increase the potential for creating truly effective services and programs that will enhance the lives of the people we serve.”

Still within this Collaborative Action Research project, an important third and last cycle was to take place. As is known, no AR (action research) cycle is complete if conclusions are not drawn up and made public. It might appear natural that the “making public” phase of the project should be a simple presentation of conclusions. In fact, it was proven that it was a full cycle in its right. Drawing personal or in-group conclusions proved to be far more than the end. Writing out reports to distribute to all the collaborators involved came as a natural element and a routine in the process. All those involved wrote periodic formal reports that were shared and discussed within the project's framework. The trainee subtitlers, for instance, wrote several short reports and final thesis that were discussed at a viva at the end of their training. Special reference also needs to be made to a sequence of 5 reports that were written by the President of a Deaf Association (APTEC) who, in addition to comments on the project, presented interesting accounts of how the Deaf react to televised information, thus sharing valuable critical insights on issues that had never been verbalised in the first person before. In every case, personal and collective reflection was scrutinised and fed into the process whenever found relevant and used to support suggestions and actions.

These experiences were also shared with many researchers within the sphere of Translation Studies and related subjects and discussions proved that the findings can feed into theory as an organic device to create other theories that might be applied to different settings. This contradicts positivist traditions in which it is theory that determines practice. In this case, through practice, previously held theoretical principles were questioned. On the other hand, this particular AR project did “make a difference” both for personal and collective reasons and had

repercussions on a wider scale. In the restricted circle of the AR group, the researcher was able to contribute towards knowledge by filtering findings in practice and presenting them to the scientific community; the trainees became reflexive practitioners with comprehensive knowledge of the *skopos* of possible future commissions; the Deaf community gained empowerment to play an active role in society; and the broadcaster became the first provider of specially devised SDH in Portugal. In a wider sphere, society at large was to benefit from the social and political awareness that came with the publicity that covered the project and the visibility that this particular group and, in the process, other groups of impaired citizens, gained.

The outcomes

Further to the conclusion that action research can be effective in the field of Translation Studies, this project shed light upon various issues pertaining to subtitling in general and SDH in particular.

The fact that the “translation” to be was to happen between two varieties of one same language – Brazilian and Continental Portuguese – brought about a number of issues that had not been systematically addressed up until then. The linguistic transfer that was in order in this *Mulheres Apaixonadas* project was quite unique, posing problems that pertain both to interlingual and intralingual SDH. In fact, the resulting language transfer may be considered to be very close to what Toury (1986:1113) called “interdialectal translation”. The problems that arose in the translation proper derived mainly from the difficulty of transposing language between two varieties of the same language.

Even though Brazilian and European Portuguese are one and the same language, they differ both in their oral and written form, in their lexis and syntax, and above all, in their referential elements. Working on a Brazilian telenovela, as rich in cultural references and local colouring as *Mulheres Apaixonadas*, made the cultural component an important focal point. This was reflected in the interpretation of certain lexical items⁷, in the transposition of interpersonal relations⁸ and the lack of equivalence for certain idiomatic expressions⁹.

Overcoming cultural barriers proved to be more difficult than transposing linguistic barriers, an issue that became all the more acute when Deaf addressees were brought into the equation for, in fact, the subtitles in case were bridging between three lingua-cultures: that of the Brazilian,

the Portuguese and the Portuguese Deaf communities. The choice to adapt Brazilian (spoken) Portuguese into European (written) Portuguese was one that resulted from the negotiation with the Deaf community. Yet, this alone was not sufficient to make the Brazilian telenovela truly accessible for the Portuguese Deaf audiences. The most challenging task was allowing for subtitles that read like European Portuguese written text to still convey the cultural components of the Brazilian reality depicted. A compromise was often necessary and when one and the other were in conflict, making choices became very difficult.

The fact that this project was a hybrid between interlingual or intralingual subtitling also showed that that which is specific to SDH goes beyond the subtitling of actual words. The telenovela genre, with its enormous number of characters, complex interwoven narrative strings, highly charged interpersonal relations, and rich sound track, offered itself naturally to the analysis of the role played by non-verbal and paralinguistic information and the different means available for its conveyance to Deaf and hard-of-hearing audiences. Different solutions, such as the use of colour and subtitle displacement for character identification, the use of descriptive subtitles or smilies to convey emotional nuances and detailed information about music with narrative value, were tested with groups of Deaf viewers, who had a say in the final choices to be made.

The outcomes of this project were, in short, numerous, and have been accounted for in detail in Neves (2005). In addition, a practical result of the project may be found in a set of guidelines for Portuguese SDH, which may be used as a valuable tool for all those involved in the provision of SDH in Portugal or in the training of future subtitlers. Given that all the solutions proposed are descriptions of subtitling solutions that were actually tested and tried with the end-users, the Deaf and hard-of-hearing themselves, they will hopefully contribute towards a better understanding of this particular type of audiovisual translation.

It is believed that, above all, this action research project must be seen as the first of many other projects of the kind and as a stepping stone for further research.

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¹ "Deaf" with capital "D" refers to people who belong to the Deaf community, who use sign language as their mother tongue and read the oral language as a second language

² According to the Censos 2001, there are 84156 deaf in Portugal, a figure that is most certainly understated. According to the Associação Portuguesa de Surdos, there are more than 150 thousand deaf people in a population of 10,356,117 (census 2001). It is almost impossible to know exact figures for deafness is often associated with other conditions such as old age and certain diseases and is easily masked for its "silent" existence.

³ Main topics available at http://www.mp.gov.pt/mp/pt/GabImprensa/Docs/20030821_Protocolo.htm

⁴ The research, which led to the thesis *Audiovisual Translation: Subtitling for the Deaf and Hard-of-hearing* (Neves 2005), was carried out between 2001 and 2004, under the supervision of Jorge Díaz-Cintas (University of Surrey Roehampton) and Maria Teresa Roberto (Universidade de Aveiro).

⁵ Special thanks are due to SIC, in the person of Mr. Silva Lopes, to the professional subtitlers Maria Auta de Barros, Ana Paula Mota and Mafalda Eliseu, the group of students from ESTG and the Portuguese Deaf community for their enthusiasm and hard work. Their determination to make the project work dictated its success.

⁶ SDH was introduced as part of the syllabus of a subject called "Tecnologias de Tradução II", at a BA level, at Escola Superior de Tecnologia e Tradução do Instituto Politécnico de Leiria, in the course of the 2002-2003 school year.

⁷ Words that belong to the two systems, European Portuguese and Brazilian Portuguese, often have different meanings.

⁸ The difference between the use of "tu" and "você", for instance.

⁹ Problems rose when meanings derived from subtle elements (e.g. "borogodó" means "sex appeal and style" in Brazilian Portuguese and "ó de borogodó" means exactly the opposite. Neither of the two expressions exists in European Portuguese and the subtlety of the expression may easily be lost by those who do not master the cultural innuendoes involved).