The Use of Subtitling in Teaching Professional Interpretation

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Abstract

Two studies of the General Direction for Education and Culture of the European Commission, one of 2008 and the other of 2011, recommend the use of subtitling both to encourage learning foreign languages and as a tool for formal learning of foreign languages. In this article we intend to illustrate the possibility of using subtitling for teaching professional interpretation from French into Romanian and from Romanian into French on the basis of their similarities. In subtitling and in interpreting, the meaning is rendered by the logical decoding of the linguistic and extralinguistic messages. Subtitling and interpreting are similar as far as the following are concerned: linguistic and extralinguistic competences involved, the semiotic systems, the types of constraints involved in decoding the message, a more active participation of the public, compared to the translation recipient. The article provides examples of the use of subtitling for all types of interpretation: sight translation, liaison interpreting, consecutive and simultaneous translation. Subtitling can be used for training various people at different degrees: university, post graduate, translators, communicators, etc. and also, with slight alterations, for improving the French language knowledge.

Keywords: subtitling, interpretation, translating competences, equivalent meaning

1. Introduction

In teaching interpretation, which is “any oral translation from a source language (SL) into a target language (TL) addressed to an audience” (Lungu-Badea, 2012, 88), teachers should be flexible and inventive. Based on the knowledge students have acquired from their previous courses, especially translation courses, teachers need to find the most appropriate methods and adjust them to the target audience, in order to build new oral translation competences and turn them into automatic processes. This is a longer process consisting of several stages: sight
Subtitling differs from other types of translation: “quoique l’interaction sémiotique du film soit déterminante pour ce qui est de la compréhension des spectateurs, les sous-titres en tant que ‘texte’ auquel les traducteurs sont confrontés demeurent un type de traduction qui relève d’un moyen de transmission spéciﬁque.” (Biagini, 2010, 20). Marta Biagini states that subtitling gives written variants of oral speeches (“des discours oraux représentés”) whose meaning “est toujours construit par les participants” (ibidem, 20); the main purpose of any subtitling is, as Simon Laks asserted in his book on subtitles, to provide the complete perception of the ﬁlm: “Le but suprême d’un sous-titrage est d’assurer, tout le long du film, un parfait équilibre visuel, auditif et psychologique entre la parole et l’écrit et de créer chez le
spectateur une plénitude de perception telle qu’il ait l’illusion de tout comprendre dans lire les sous-titres” (Cornu, 1996,153). This “co-construction” occurs in interpretation as well, as in this case the audience, always present, “n’est plus un récepteur inconnu et présumé du message, comme dans le cas de la traduction, mais participe à la transmission du message et à sa fidélité par des gestes, des regards, etc. L’interprète reçoit en permanence des ‘messages’ de son public.” (Visky, 2010, 173).

The similarities between the two translation processes engage similar competences that facilitate the construction and interpretation of the message meaning. In subtitling and interpretation, the interpretative work requires four coexisting competences that must be “built” in the case of beginner translators. These competences help subtitlers and interpreters to retrieve data (linguistic competence) from an utterance containing information they already know (encyclopaedic competence); the result of their work should observe the rules of the discourse (rhetorical-pragmatic competence) and the principles of natural logic (logical competence) (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1991, 299). Logical competence also occurs in rendering the meaning: “La construction du sens n’est pas le produit de la signification des mots composant l’énoncé, mais le résultat d’un processus référentiel, c’est-à-dire d’un raisonnement logique, exploitant à la fois les informations linguistiques et les informations non-linguistiques” (Durieux, 2007, 50). Both in subtitling and interpretation, the main competences are linguistic and encyclopaedic. The use of the other two is limited by the specific of these translation processes: the translating speed and the quality of organising the message received from the utterer in the interpretation work; the quality of the script and the director’s vision in the subtitling activity. These competences are included in the common approach of free translation – or target-oriented translation, as Georgiana Lungu-Badea calls it (Lungu-Badea, 2013, 131), based on the French word “cibliste” – since translators “mettent l’accent non pas sur le signifiant, ni même sur le signifié, mais sur le sens ou, mieux, sur l’effet du texte; pour eux, l’objet de la traduction, ce n’est pas la langue, mais la parole ou le discours c’est-à-dire le texte ou l’œuvre /.../ tout leur art va utiliser l’ensemble des ressources propres qu’offre la langue-cible” (Ladmiral, 2010, 18). Through this approach, translators – subtitlers or interpreters – are free to choose from different variants, depending on their subjective motivations: “sentiments, sensations, impressions au détriment des arguments strictement rationnels”; in this way, they assimilate “une sorte de discipline du subjectif” (Pelea, 2013, 189).

3. The use of subtitling in teaching interpretation

The first film for which I translated the subtitles was the comedy entitled Les Bronzés, shown at the Fun Film Festival organised by the French Cultural Institute of Timisoara in 2011. In the following year, I worked with the first and second-year students of the Faculty of Communication Sciences of the “Politehnica” University of Timisoara, who study translation-interpretation. We translated the subtitles for Poupoupidou, a film that was to be shown later, during the evening film presentations organised by the same French Institute. It was while working on the first film that I first thought of using this type of translation in teaching interpretation. While translating the subtitles, I realised that I was frequently using competences and abilities I had gained through and for simultaneous interpretation. Working with the students on the second film confirmed my first impression. We talked both about the multisemiotic meaning of the message and the wide range of rendering possibilities that the source language provides. Subtitling is an instrument that facilitates “développer les compétences linguistiques pour les langues déjà apprises” (Commission Européenne, 2011, 19); it also encourages other competences that help the translator/interpreter to minimize the time required to understand the message in the SL and to render it into the TL as quickly and faithfully as possible, this being the first step in “learning” professional interpretation. Subtitling is also very useful in the general learning process performed collectively or individually in life. Associating sound with image and word is a ludic, easy-to-use method of acquiring or improving not only foreign language knowledge, but also general knowledge. Subtitling can be used in teaching all types of interpretation or translation-interpretation, such as sight translation. In sight translations, the teacher can ask the students to do script translation exercises. In addition, he can insist on how important image and sound are in the quick understanding and rendering of the message, by means of concrete examples: comparing the amount of information of an image inserted in a written text with the amount of information contained in the subtitles of a fiction film or a documentary; choosing untranslatable fragments or expressions from a text and a film, commenting upon the contribution of image and sound to their understanding and translation, reading the subtitles etc.. The disadvantage is that the film script does not provide the complete understanding of the film message, and image and sound are absent in sight translation. In liaison interpreting, one can choose a film scene with two or three characters, cut the sound off and stop the image after a line or a series of lines, then start the interpretation. The disadvantage of this exercise is that the translation
cannot be done in both languages and the context is artificial. But if one uses a documentary that contains a conversation between speakers of two different languages, without dubbing, this disadvantage disappears. In teaching consecutive interpretation, the use of a documentary or a recorded TV show with subtitles in the same language (which the student does not see at first) increases the speed of taking notes and the quality of the notes; in the next stage, students can correct their notes while reading the subtitles or do a sight translation exercise. The professor can choose a film that re-creates the formal atmosphere of a conference, reunion, course etc. and use it for consecutive interpretation exercises; however, the stress or the rhythm of the characters’ voice may hinder or distort message reception and rendering. Subtitles can also be used in teaching simultaneous translation. First, the students give oral translations of a film scene without subtitles, and then they are given the possibility to read the subtitles as well. The disadvantage is the absence of the film script, leading to the risk of misunderstanding words or ideas because of voice stress or tone and the impossibility of correcting them later. Also subtitling does not facilitate the gaining of extralinguistic competences that allow the interpreter to focus on his work and carry it out with constant efficiency. The type of exercise, the audio-visual document, the level of message difficulty or the organisation of the exercise depend on the type of interpretation one wishes to teach and the competences one intends to improve or build. In other words, they all depend on the final purpose of the exercise, the profile of the student group and, last but not least, the professor’s competences and enthusiasm.

4. Conclusions

Our approach is not new. A number of teachers have already used it in teaching translation or interpretation techniques or enriching their students’ foreign language knowledge. We believe that our experience as translators, interpreters, subtitlers and teachers helps us to provide pertinent solutions adjusted to the reality of the fields we translate from. There are universities that include subtitling in their foreign language study programmes or have subtitling laboratories that are used in translation and interpreting departments. In our opinion, if used moderately and by skilled professionals, subtitling may become an effective tool for learning and building communication competences. Subtitling is the point where translation and interpretation meet, “a written discourse turned oral”, a balance between the two, as Marta Biagini says: “il nous paraît qu’un vrai équilibre entre, d’une part, le pôle de la rigidité, de la concision et de la cohérence typique de l’écrit et, d’autre part, le pôle de la flexibilité, de la redondance et de l’implicite typique de l’oral, pourrait être atteint, restituant finalement aux sous-titres leur nature de discours écrit oralisé” (Biagini, 2010, 31).

References


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