Changing Horizons in Audiovisual Translation: 'We Are Becoming More Aware of the Power and Impact of Language'

Interview with **Jorge Díaz-Cintas**, University College London

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1058-5757

Ingrida Tatolytė
Vilnius University
https://orcid.org/0009-0007-7624-3155

Dear Jorge, welcome to Vilnius.
Thank you.

I am very happy that you eventually came to our university. Our conference is dedicated to Translation, Ideology, Ethics, Response and Credibility, and I would like to touch upon all these aspects in our conversation. But I propose to start from a very naive question. You are a very famous and prominent researcher in the field of audiovisual translation, or AVT, and a distinguished expert in the market. Despite its reach, people have a very misty understanding of what audiovisual translation implies. Could you, please, expand on that? What is AVT and when did it all begin? I presume it started with cinema?

Indeed, it started just a few years later. When cinema was invented, films were, of course, silent, with no dialogue and very little text in them. So, there was no need to translate much. At the time, there were people in cinemas whose job was to explain the film to their audience and translate any text that appeared on-screen into the language of that audience. In Spain, they were called *explicadores* ('explicators'), as they literally explained what was happening on-screen. Such 'explicators' exist in

Southeast Asia until this day. In Japan, they are called *benshi* (弁士) and they can be very popular because they add their own style when explaining the film. The role of the explicators was not only to translate or read any written information but also to engage the audience into what was happening on-screen. Of course, once the sound was invented and dialogue became part of the equation, this approach became obsolete. Confronted with the need of having to translate foreign dialogue contained in the soundtrack, some countries went for subtitling, when the text is written on the screen and the viewers can hear the dialogue and read the translation, whereas some other nations, especially in Southern, and to some extent Central Europe, such as France, Italy, Spain, Czechia, Hungary and Germany preferred dubbing, where the soundtrack is replaced completely, and the illusion is created that actors are speaking our own language. For those who are not used to it, it can look very awkward when a very famous US or French actor appears on-screen speaking fluent Spanish or German. But when watching a dubbed version, people tend to trigger a cognitive mechanism, known as suspension of disbelief, whereby they enter the fictional world without querying this linguistic mismatch.

In other words, it all started with popular culture and the need to engage wider audiences.

Yes, audiovisual translation begins with the advent of mass media, when cinemagoing becomes a very popular pastime everywhere in the world. The media industry quickly realised the financial attractiveness of growing across the world and, to reach out to everyone and increase their profit and revenue, distributors needed to translate their productions into other languages. The result is still visible: The media industry is a very profitable and enduring one.

So, the industry played a role, too. How much is there of a social element in engaging people through audiovisual translation, and how much is the industry using the media to make financial profit?

Mass media has always been very powerful. It is not by accident, that USA culture is a referent to virtually everyone in the world. People watch so many American films based in New York, for instance, that they end up being familiar with the city even if they have never set foot there. They are not only getting acquainted with many geographical locations of the USA, they also get to know about their food, their celebrations, their clothing. Some people in Spain would wear baseball caps even though baseball is not widely played in the country. And, of course, everyone knows about Halloween and even celebrate it in their respective countries. One example I like is the Swedish

miniseries *Millennium* (2010), based on Stieg Larsson's *Millennium* crime novels series. The thrillers take place on the streets of Stockholm, and, on the back of the films' popularity, customised tours of the city were organised to follow the characters' tracks. And then, the series *Montalbano* (1999–2021), based on the detective novels by Andrea Camilleri, has been a huge success for Sicily; and these days tourists travel there to see the places where the series has been shot and to eat the same food, and in the same restaurants, as the main protagonist in the films. The powers that be are fully aware of the influence that the mass media holds on the audience, and they are more than happy to exploit it.

We can argue that some leaders, including Lenin, were aware of the power of cinema from the very beginning because they realized that it was a very good platform for manipulation.

Absolutely. Actually, to some it comes as a surprise that, in many countries, the first censorship regulations were drafted for cinema rather than literature or theatre, because films were considered dangerous and with the potential to reach vast amounts of people.

Can we say that the very first subtitles in cinema were already used to alter, to some degree, the original message or meaning?

The problem is that we do not have much information from that period. The celluloid film used to shoot the early motion pictures was very fragile and self-destroys with the passing of time. This is why we do not have many films from that period that we could use to judge the nature and value of the first subtitles. What we do know is that directors used intertitles that were embedded into the images. These were instances of written text that appeared on the screen, usually in the original language, though sometimes they would resort to a foreign language for it to look a little bit exotic. Some directors were very creative on this front, actually. In my opinion, however, the first subtitles must have been quite standard. Linguistically, they offered a rather literal translation of what was being said. Technically, they can be said to have been poor, particularly if compared to the technology that we have nowadays. They would flicker and be out of synchronization, making it difficult to know who was saying what, as they would come a bit late or too early. Those were the challenges, and the pioneers in this field were just exploring how to do it on the go. In these early years, the challenge was also what languages to translate into. The industry was not keen to invest into too many languages, as translation was perceived to be an onerous task, both in terms of time and money. For instance, they would subtitle into French and distribute the

film not only in France and Belgium, but also in African countries where French was considered to be a *lingua franca* at the time. As another example, films in Poland would be screened with Russian subtitles.

It was also an ideological move, was it not? Language was used as a soft power tool, because who is in power of the language is in power of the message.

Certainly. Although at first sight it may be seen as a financial decision, because the big production companies, the so-called *majors*, did not want to spend much money on translation, the fact is that they were, in effect, banking on the role of the traditional imperial languages while at the same time perpetuating their power and reach.

Audiovisual translation started with the rise of mass media. How did it all start for you? How did the industry look like at the time when you joined in? Was there any research at all into subtitling, specifically, or into audiovisual translation in broader terms?

As I have mentioned on many occasions, I was lucky to be in London when digitization took place. Back in the 1990s, the industry had just discovered a little disk, called DVD, which could hold not just a film, but often some extra material too, and contained dubbed and subtitled versions in many languages. This was a pivotal change in the industry and companies were in the lookout for people who could work in the field. I come from a country, Spain, where everything has been traditionally dubbed and, at the end of the 20th century, most of the classic films had never been subtitled into Spanish. Now, for their commercial re-release on DVD, there was an immediate need to subtitle them. The companies at the forefront were usually multinationals with offices in London. A lot of subtitling needed to be done, the industry was exploding, and I was there. London was, and to a large extent continues to be, one of the hubs for AVT. I studied philology at the University of Valencia and did not really have the chance to study translation. In my early years in London, I managed to do some freelancing as a translator, and I also did a stint at the European Parliament in Luxembourg, but I had never subtitled before. I somewhat managed to get in touch with a company called Intelfax, who were searching for people with Spanish as their mother tongue and were happy to train newcomers in the art of subtitling. At that time, I was already working at Roehampton University and, a few years later, I managed to launch a Master's programme in Audiovisual Translation, in collaboration with Intelfax. This is how it all began for me.

I accepted the company's invitation to do some work for them and started looking for more information and studies on subtitling. It was then that I realized that there

was virtually nothing written about the topic. I found out that the European Media Institute (EMI) in Düsseldorf had a little library on audiovisual translation, with material collected by someone called Josephine Dries, a librarian from the Netherlands, who worked there and happened to be interested in the topic. I went to Düsseldorf and met up with her. The collection consisted of two boxes containing a little book, a few articles and various cuttings from newspapers in different languages: Dutch, French, English, German, and probably some others. They were mostly for general distribution, discussing whether subtitling or dubbing was a better technique, and their main characteristics. Josephine kept everything she found on the topic and did publish a handbook on how to make the most of audiovisual translation in film production and distribution.[1] Then, she sort of disappeared from the AVT scene, until I saw her recently in an interview arranged by ESIST.[2]

It seems that research into audiovisual translation arose from the personal interest of a few people.

Very few people, indeed. We could all meet in one small room! I think it was in Brussels, or perhaps in Düsseldorf, that nine or ten of us met to work on the *Code of Good Subtitling Practise*:[3] Aline Remael, Mary Carroll, Jan Ivarsson, Corinne Imhauser, Yves Gambier... It was very casual, and cozy at the same time. Back then, I was pretty sure that I had got in my hands everything that had ever been published on audiovisual translation. Now it would be totally impossible to collect everything that gets written on AVT.

Academia has changed so much; we all survive on articles.

Yes, the famous 'publish or perish,' but there is also a lot of work produced by students: MA dissertations, PhD theses, and so on.

You defended your PhD in 1997. Aside from your supervisor, what other people were there to consult while you were working on it?

I had been working on my PhD from the early 1990s. My supervisor was not a translation specialist; she worked in the field of functional pragmatics, and lived in Valencia, while I was already in London. So, she could not advise on the topic itself,

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[1]   Dries, Josephine. 1995. *Dubbing and Subtitling: Guidelines for Production and Distribution*. European Institute for the Media. ISBN 3929673169, 9783929673166.

[2]   *ESIST Interview With Josephine Dries*. YouTube: ESIST European Association for Studies in Screen. Accessed 4 September 2023: <www.youtube.com/watch?v=4XZWkL0UItc&t=920s>.

[3]   Carroll, Mary and Jan Ivarsson. 1998. *Code of Good Subtitling Practice*. Endorsed by the European Association for Studies in Screen Translation in Berlin on 17 October 1998.

but she trusted me, and supervised me allowing me to do whatever I needed to. At the time there was virtually nothing written on the topic, and you could not download anything from the Internet like you can do these days. In Spain, there was the PhD written by Patrick Zabalbeascoa,[4] but it was on dubbing humour. My PhD was the first one on subtitling written in Spanish.

Was there anything written specifically on subtitling in other languages back then, for instance in English?

There was nothing substantial written in English on subtitling. I knew of a book in French, by Simon Laks,[5] but could not get my hands on it. Later I discovered the PhD by Teresa Tomaszkiewicz,[6] also in French, though she is from Poland. She researched subtitling from a very linguistic angle. I do not know of any other PhDs in any other language that had been written by the time I was working on mine.

So, as a research field, audiovisual translation did not exist at the time.

You could say so. There was virtually nothing. Even from a pedagogical point of view, when I started working in the field, nobody was teaching it at university level in the UK, or many other countries for that matter. There were a few educational centres where AVT was marginally taught, like Lille, Ghent and Bochum, but that was more or less it.

What was the software like back then?

There was virtually no software used in academia. Subtitling programs existed, but they were far too expensive, too complex, and were meant for professional use only, so universities could not really afford them. When I started teaching, I worked with VHS tapes, because there was nothing else. And, of course, the majority of Spanish films available in the UK were already subtitled. The first years, I used to work with pen and paper and would show the film to my students on a TV set in class, and put a piece of paper at the bottom of the screen to hide the subtitles so that the students would not copy from the commercial subtitles and could come up with their own translations.

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[4]   Zabalbeascoa, Patrick. 1993. *Developing Translation Studies to Better Account for Audiovisual Texts and Other New Forms of Text Production*. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, University of Lleida.

[5]   Laks, Simon. 2013 (1957). *Le sous-titrage de films. Sa technique – son esthétique*. (L'Écran traduit Hors-série n° 1 – 2013). Accessed 4 September 2023: <https://beta.ataa.fr/documents/ET-HS01-complet.pdf>.

[6]   Tomaszkiewicz, Teresa. 1993. *Les opérations linguistiques qui sous-tendent le processus de sous-titrage des films*. PhD Thesis. Poznań: University Adam Mickiewicz.

Then I started using the demo of a programme called FAB. It was a free version that allowed you to do only up to 20 subtitles, so if you needed more you would have to save them in separate files. Sometimes, we ended up with 5 files of 20 subtitles each for a relatively short clip. Those were the days!

And what software was used in the industry?

In the industry they used WinCaps, which is one of the traditional ones in the UK, and also FAB and SWIFT.

Were you fascinated by all those new things; technology, digitization, working with specialist software?

I still remember the first day I sat in front of a subtitling programme. It was in Ghent. I went there on a visit. They had a module on subtitling with just a few students. In a corner, there was a computer and a VHS player. It was very peculiar. One of the teachers briefly showed me how the programme worked, but I did not get to play with it. The first time I used a programme myself, properly, was in Intelfax, and it was SWIFT; fully professional. But you still needed video cards for your PC, because PCs could not read images, they did not have a DVD player or anything like that installed. I had to do my work at Intelfax premises, and had to rely on the technicians who would encode the images from the video because I could not do it myself. At the time, I was not very technically savvy, to say the least, so it was quite challenging. Now, there is not much choice and you really must like technology if you are to survive in audiovisual translation.

When you received your commissions to subtitle a production, did you receive a copy of the programme or film to watch or just a script?

As I mentioned, I used to go to the company.

To watch a film?

Yes. But I did not get to work on many films; mostly I had to subtitle corporate and music videos. I remember working on *The Riverdance* (1995–), the Irish show, which was very popular then, and videos by U2, ABBA... The videos would contain the concert and lots of extra footage explaining the background, which sometimes was longer than the actual concert. I subtitled a lot of extras. I also subtitled videos about banks, motorbikes… and I do not even like motorbikes. And I did things for Columbia TriStar Television, too. More than once, I was asked to subtitle into English, which I normally prefer not to do. At first, I rejected the offers, but eventually the company

convinced me because they did not have anyone who would understand the audio in Spanish well enough, and they preferred to correct my English than to work with somebody who would not be able to grasp the nuances of the original dialogue. One of the commissions was a Spanish programme, which is still on the TV in Spain, called *Pasapalabra* ('Move to Another Word,' 2000–), and it was all about guessing words from definitions. Of course, the word in Spanish would begin with whichever letter, and in English was a completely different one, so it was really impossible to translate it in a way that it would work in English. After I queried them, they told me I did not need to worry about it as the translation was for a company thinking of bringing this format to the UK, and they wanted to know whether such programme would work here. They were only interested in understanding the dynamics and how it worked. So, those were some of my assignments. I was always changing from one topic to another, and it was very interesting.

How did research and the field of AVT look like back in the 1990s? What problems did you need to solve back then?

In the 1990s, doing research was problematic from many angles. It was very difficult to get hold of the material, particularly if you wanted to have subtitle files with the timecodes, for instance, so that you could understand the technical constraints. Also, we did not have reliable information about what had already been researched, or how to get copies of any publications. I was relatively lucky because I worked at university and was able to travel a lot, so I would pick up the material piece by piece from the EMI in Düsseldorf, or the libraries of a few translation schools in Belgium and Spain: a BA or MA dissertation on subtitling or dubbing, or a students' journal with some articles on these topics. When I was working on my PhD, I felt almost like I was reinventing the wheel.

Teaching was also very problematic. We did not have many resources, means, or even know-how to use the software but we still wanted to simulate industry practice and workflows.

It was very creative.

And very enjoyable, too, because you could see that the students really liked it. Even if it was a bit pedestrian because we could not work with the technology.

Later on, things improved a lot, particularly with the development of freeware. There was a group of people in one of the universities in Catalonia, called the Poor Technology Group, and they wanted technology to be freely available to everyone. They created one of the first free subtitling programmes ever, *Subtitle Workshop*, and that changed the teaching environment quite substantially.

So, there was a social element in that, was it not?

Yes, and we were able to use the freeware with our students. But to do your commissions for the industry you would still need to go to the workplace because you did not have a software at home. Or, at least, very few did. Sometimes you would have to spend long hours at the company in order to finish your work and meet the deadlines.

There was a lot of in-person involvement.

Indeed. With our experience of the pandemic, we can appreciate such involvement from a different perspective; it was nice the way we used to work. It was an excuse to leave home and allowed us meeting other people who were subtitling into other languages. And that was very enriching.

It seems that the work of the translator did not feel that lonely back in the day…

Exactly. I remember working for ITFC and going to their facilities in Park Royal, in London. It was a huge place; they used to work directly with ITV. So, when you stepped in, you would see everybody involved and you would feel a part of the team. Now, you can do all the work sitting alone in front of the little screen of your laptop, or even a smaller one… In May 2022, I held a subtitling seminar in Kempten, Germany, where I showed students how to create their own subtitles in the cloud. At the end of the workshop, one of them was overjoyed as she had managed to do all her subtitles on her mobile.

Technology has become easier to use and more versatile, but at the same time the translator's work has also become more solitary.

To a large extent, yes. Now you are mainly working on your own and from home.

What else have changed?

First of all, the sheer volume of academic work on AVT. In the older days, I never had a paper or conference presentation turned down as it used to be so exotic! The downside was that my presentation would be slotted early in the morning or in the last panel of the day because they would not expect a large audience. Now we have full-fledged conferences on AVT, dedicated entirely to its issues, and everybody binge-watches on audiovisual productions. And it makes it very challenging to keep an eye on everything that is being published in our field, when there is so much out there, and in so many different languages. I have to admit that sometimes I feel out of my depth.

Are there any specificities of subtitling into different languages and cultures? Or would you rather say that subtitling techniques and issues are universal?

No, I do not think they are universal. We are very used to the Western way of doing things, but, for instance, in China they are accustomed to watching bilingual subtitles. If the film is in English, they have subtitles in English, which tends to be a transcription of the English dialogue, together with the subtitles in Chinese.

How do they manage to keep track of them?

Research has been conducted into how viewers divide their attention, how they listen and read in two languages simultaneously, whether they compare subtitles in both languages.[7] Those double subtitles have been mostly used on social media, but now TV broadcasters in China are moving in that direction as well to tap into their younger audiences' preferences. Then, in Korea and Japan, you get text popping up on the screen all the time. They call it *telop*.[8] It can come across as a bit weird for some of us: A person is talking on-screen, and in the *telop* they give you a gist of what that person has just said. From an ideological perspective this is very telling as the text is there to reinforce some ideas over others.

It amounts to a paratext or extras...

It does in many ways. These texts can be construed as a sort of help for the viewers or guidance on how to understand the message. Basically, they are narrowing the original down to the way they want it to be interpreted by the audience.

Another way to exploit this type of text is in the form of tongue-in-cheek comments that appear at the top of the screen. I remember seeing them during an interview with a Korean musical band; their answers were subtitled at the bottom of the screen, and then suddenly ironic comments to their answers, created by the producers of the interview, would appear at the top of the screen. So, at the bottom you would have a singer saying 'Yes, I am a bit tired,' and, at the top, the comment would echo: 'Yeah, god knows what you were doing last night.' The BBC tried this format for their popular

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7   See Liao, Sixin, Jan-Louis Kruger and Stephen Doherty. 2020. The Impact of Monolingual and Bilingual Subtitles on Visual Attention, Cognitive Load, and Comprehension. *The Journal of Specialised Translation* Issue 33, January 2020. Accessed 5 September 2023: <https://jostrans.org/issue33/art_liao.pdf>.

8   See Sasamoto, Ryoko, Minako O'Hagan and Stephen Doherty. 2017. Telop, Affect, and Media Design: A Multimodal Analysis of Japanese TV Programs. *Television & New Media* 18 (5), 427–440. Accessed 5 September 2023: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476416677099>.

TV programme *The Apprentice* (2005–). They called such subtitles 'honest subtitles'[9] and focused not on what the participants were actually saying on-screen, but rather on their performance or what they were supposed to be thinking. They amounted to sarcastic interventions that contrasted with what the audience could hear. So, you would hear something like 'Oh, you have been really great' and you would read 'Such rubbish what you've done there.' The subtitles were 'honest' in the sense that they allowed the thoughts of the participants to appear on the screen, rather than what they were actually saying out loud.

This works as translation…

You could say so; a translation in a very ideological way, an interpretation of what it is not being said. These subtitles are not just a postproduction addition to the programme; they are a crucial part of the entertainment. Without them, the programme loses part of its appeal as they are there to add a funny, ironic layer.

In Southeast Asia, you get written text on the screen virtually all the time. In the Western world, after the sound was invented in cinema, written text sort of disappeared from screen. People might exchange messages on the phone or go through their emails, but we do not really project much text on the screen otherwise. In China, for instance, they have a subtitling system called *danmu* (弹幕) which is very social, dynamic, and interactive. *Danmu* can be translated as 'a screen of bullets,' which means that there is a lot of text on the screen, and sometimes it is even difficult to see the images behind it. While in the West those 'honest' subtitles are added by the broadcaster, like the BBC, in China, people can write their own comments while watching a film, which then appear immediately on the screen and everybody else can read them. Some of these comments can be very witty, ironic, funny, and even political.

Is this not a little bit distracting?

Yes, it is, particularly if you just want to see the film, but if you are watching the film or TV series for a different experience, then it can be great. You can learn what other people think, what their opinions are. It is a way of interacting with other people who are also interested in the same programmes as you. Sometimes, when the programme has been subtitled, they comment on the quality of the translation, suggest corrections, add cultural information.

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[9]   Cf. BBC One. *The Apprentice: Honest Subtitles*. Accessed 5 September 2023: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p034244d>.

But this is in marked contrast to how film directors intend their films to be watched. I remember Otar Iosseliani, in a visit to Vilnius to introduce one of his films, asking the audience not to read the subtitles. He said that he had put so much effort into creating the images for the spectators that when the audience directs their attention to the subtitles, they miss on what is most important.

It is a very different experience, but one can find similar practices in the UK, too. In Central London, Prince Charles Cinema has been very famous for many years for offering screenings that are a sort of subversion of what going to cinema is. They mainly screen musicals and started with *The Sound of Music* (1965). The films contain sing-along subtitles, written at the bottom of the screen, so that everybody can join in, shouting, singing, and clapping. The cinema becomes anything but a quiet place!

This aligns with something that Jon Cook called the "saturation" of a cultural field: Everybody can take part in it, become co-creators, feel as a poet, writer, subtitler, or even a critic, but the art of criticism has disappeared.

This can be seen as an example of 'low culture,' as it is clearly an attempt to disrupt what is called 'high culture.' Some also called it 'gamification' or 'popularization.' Everyone can participate and some people can take it to some extremes. Some get dressed as nuns because there are nuns in the film, others wear leather hose as in the Alps, and they all sing together. I am not a fan of *The Sound of Music* myself, but I have to admit that it is fun to be part of this experience. You watch half of the film, then you go to the bar for a break and a drink, or more, and then continue watching and singing. Such screenings have been tremendously popular, and films such as *Mamma Mia!* (2008) and *The Rocky Horror Show* (1973) are also regularly screened in the same way.

To some extent, it is also bringing people back to what the theatre as an entertainment was in Ancient Greece; engaging for a whole day, supporting the characters from their seats, living through their experiences, and crying together.

In a way, it is. But it is much more dynamic now, with the use of subtitles you can engage more. And karaoke subtitles have been around for some time. In Japan, especially among young people, it is very popular these days to have a kind of karaoke but with dubbing. While the characters on-screen are moving their mouths, people try to fill them with something silly, while the rest in the audience laugh watching them.

What about research into subtitling in particular? Which details did you pay attention to when you started researching into it, and how has it changed? I

remember when we took part at the roundtable back in 2017 in London,[10] there were different presentations given on how subtitles were placed on the screen, how important it was to engage the audience, especially the deaf and the hard of hearing people so that they could see and read subtitles on various screens, how *subtitles for deaf and hard of hearing* (SDH) people had become a means for social inclusion. It seems that the attention has shifted to different aspects over the years.

When we started, very little had been done, and our research coincided with the boom in Descriptive Translation Studies. We did not know what audiovisual translation really was, we did not even know how to call it; I and others called it 'film translation,' or 'cinema translation' back then. Our first aim was to understand, to describe the field and look at what was happening in this type of translation. As I came from a philological background, my take was very linguistic oriented. So, for my PhD, I investigated the subtitles in one of Woody Allen's films: The changes that were introduced in them, the transfer of cultural references, the role of condensation, and so on. But now, it is a thing of the past. We have learnt what audiovisual translation, and in my case, subtitling is, and we have branched out in different directions.

In recent years, the study of technology has been very prominent. AVT as a field seems to be an ideal case study for the implementation of artificial intelligence, as it comprises sound, images, language… Its multimodality offers lots of potential for further exploration.

But also, as researchers, we are reaching out to the receivers, the viewers. There are lots of reception studies being conducted now. The other big focus is on Access Services: SDH, audio description for the blind, but also for people with Asperger syndrome, Autism, people who find it difficult to relate to emotions and for whom descriptions that explain the interactions between the characters might be beneficial.

In many respects, we are moving beyond the act of translation and looking into its impact. Linguistics has slightly migrated to the margins, though there are still quite a few researchers looking into the translation of cultural references, humour, and metaphors in AVT, for example.

Let us pick up on this progression of technology and its impact, and speak about the ideological implications. My friend and colleague, Elena Sakalauskaitė, who has been researching into Augmented Reality,[11] once noted that with the progression of

[10] Public Roundtable 'Films in Translation—All Is Not Lost: Foreign Language Films and Cultural Mediation: Audiovisual Translation and Its Publics,' University of East Anglia, UCL, BFI, United Kingdom, 26 May 2017.

[11] Sakalauskaitė, Elena. 'Augmented Reality Art in Various Cultural Contexts.' Paper presented at the International Conference 'Visuality 2015: Intercultural Creative Discourses,' VGTU, Vilnius,

technology and our fascination about the immersive environment, we forget to look into the input and the content. Then it becomes easier to manipulate the audiences.

I could not agree more. As I mentioned earlier, unlike in other areas of translation, there is so much of everything going on in AVT. Special effects can be truly amazing these days and watching this type of productions can be seen as a way of escapism. Maybe we pay less attention to the dialogue because we are following the images, and that opens the doors to easy manipulation, as some ideas can be channelled in a subliminal manner. We end up assimilating those messages without even realizing what is happening.

I guess it is only a question of time before the media industry embraces immersive reality, where other senses can be stimulated and, as your colleague implicates, will make it easier to manipulate the audiences in different ways. Immersive reality is something that has been investigated in other fields. Videogames, for instance, are more advanced in this research than we are in media localization, since they have been experimenting in gamification and immersive environments for quite some time now. Recently, I read a short article about the *metaverse*,[12] with reference to the film and TV industry, and it was very interesting. It discusses how the metaverse helps creating immersive realities, alternative worlds as second life, and you get into those realities surrounded by sound, text, images, and tactile experiences to make it more real.

If AVT, as any translation, can be used to manipulate the original content and the audiences, it raises a question of credibility. How much can we trust subtitles? Is there any research into how much the audiences trust subtitles? Is it possible to research into trust?

I am not sure, but I guess there might be some tools in Psychology and Sociology Studies that could be used for cognitive studies of this nature. I would imagine some tests could be carried out from a reception studies perspective. But then one has to be careful about how to interpret the results. When Netflix asked the American audiences whether they preferred to have foreign films subtitled or dubbed, viewers said they were keener on subtitles, which is understandable as they had never really been exposed to dubbing. But then, when Netflix eventually offered a choice between both dubbed and subtitled versions, most viewers chose the dubbed ones. So, how much can we trust the audience's word? How many people should we ask to get significant results?

Lithuania, 23–24 April 2015. See also Sakalauskaitė, Elena. 2015. Augmented Reality as Means of Travel—when Picture Changes the Place. *Creativity Studies* Vol. 8(2): 95–102. ISSN 2345-0479 / eISSN 2345-0487.

[12]   McCarthy, Shane. 2022. Hey, Film and TV Industry: Are You Paying Attention to the Metaverse? *M&E Journal*, *M+E Connections* September 13, 2022. Accessed 5 September 2023: <https://www.mesaonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/22.01-ME-Journal-Irdeto.pdf>.

What about discourse studies in translation? Could comparative discourse studies be the way to analyse credibility in translation?

I find it very challenging to make such claims. I guess there are many ways of doing it. There are studies into how much people trust some newspapers, for instance, but not so much into translation itself, though the work of Patrick Cadwell[13] on this topic is very interesting. When you trust a source, it seems that it would not matter what the newspaper writes or what the translation says because the information is taken as credible. But this clearly does not mean that translations are faithful or not biased. We are all biased one way or another. So, do viewers trust the translation as such? Or a special outlet that claims to be 'feminist,' 'gay,' or 'left-wing'? Sometimes, it is not so much the translation itself but what surrounds it that affects the viewers' trust.

From a rhetorical point of view, you are absolutely spot on. If we look into how rhetoric works and how the audiences adhere to something said, it always comes down to the whole package: We trust the person who speaks so we support the idea, or we support the idea and hate every aspect or every utterance that possibly contradicts it...

Or we support the person even when they say or do something that we are not normally inclined to accept.

If it comes 'in packages,' would it be essential to conduct contextual research?

Certainly. But we must bear in mind that we, humans, are very different and volatile. Some people are firmly settled in their ideas, but others change them constantly. They might vote for a right-wing party in one election and for a left-wing one in the next one.

But does this fluidity not make it even easier to manipulate viewers through AVT? You mentioned the choice between dubbing and subtitling. In Communist countries, films were dubbed as part of a clear censorship agenda.

Same as in Francoist Spain, where films were censored and hence only dubbed. And in the Germany of Hitler, and the Italy of Mussolini…

In addition, Lithuanian actors playing in Soviet movies were dubbed by Russian speaking actors for the Soviet audiences. For instance, Donatas Banionis's voice

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[13] Cadwell, Patrick. 2020. Trust, Distrust and Translation in a Disaster. *Disaster Prevention and Management* Vol. 29 No. 2, 57–174. <https://doi.org/10.1108/DPM-11-2018-0374>.

that we are used to hear in Adrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972), and other films in Russian, is not his real voice. He had a very strong Lithuanian accent when speaking in Russian and the powers behind the production decided to dub him instead. So, unless an 'exotic' Baltic accent was needed, Baltic actors appeared on-screen with the voice of other actors, and that voice stuck to them. Ideologically, it changes the picture very much, as it seems that all Lithuanians spoke perfect Russian, which was not the case. The viewers would follow the movie, of course, and would not even question the voice of the actor or their native level of Russian.

That is a most interesting example that clearly shows how manipulation takes place on-screen. Of course, identity is created, and perpetuated, through language. In Spain, dubbing was made compulsory so that the audience could not hear other languages: English, which was the language of the enemy at the time, but also crucially national languages like Catalan, Basque and Galician. Castilian was the only language that could be heard on-screen, thus reinforcing the idea that Spain was 'one, big, and free,' as the fascist motto would want us to believe. Differences were annihilated and the Catalans had to speak Spanish, as had the Basques and the Galicians. The same happened in Germany, where numerous dialects are spoken. With dubbing made compulsory by Hitler, *Hochdeutsch* was chosen as a way of reinforcing the unity of the country by using the same language variety across the whole country. In Italy, something similar happened during Mussolini's fascist regime and the Florentine accent is the one that made it to the screens.

This is why after the collapse of the Soviet Union some of the former so called 'fraternal' republics were so suspicious of dubbing. They rejected it for a long time. As did Poland. But subtitling was not much of an option because people were not used to it, it was particularly difficult for the senior generation—it is still very difficult for them. For instance, my mother would not go to watch a subtitled film...

Funny you should say that. Mine neither.

So, cinemas lost big numbers of senior viewers. In a way it was a mistake, as the Russian language was a powerful soft tool and took over the TV market. The older generation understood Russian well and consumed productions in Russian. It made it easier to manipulate them. And in effect, this happened in some regions of Lithuania. The age factor was important for the choice. With the shift to subtitling, senior generations lost access to most foreign productions, and they

watched Russian programmes because they understood the language. In Hungary, however, they preserved dubbing because they were used to it.

Hungary is pro-dubbing, the same as the Czech Republic and Slovakia. There is a very nice documentary from Romania, entitled *VHS vs Communism* (2014),[14] on how people used translated versions of films to bypass the censorship of the time and promote the circulation of foreign productions. It features the people who were doing the translations at the time. Translation was a subversive activity, showing the power of language in cultural exchanges.

This is why at the time we preferred that horrible, one voice, monotonous underground voice-over.

I guess it was perceived as being more genuine, more real, and less manipulative, though the jury is out as to whether this was really the case.

I think, I still trust it more than anything else, even more than subtitles, because technically we have to condense the dialogue and shorten it to fit in the subtitles.

Reduction of dialogue is a technical manipulation which is unavoidable otherwise we will not have enough time to read most subtitles. And, when we condense, we can also perform a certain degree of ideological manipulation. It is sometimes difficult to tell why the original dialogue has been reduced one way or another but there are ways to investigate it, or, at least, we can use our academic instinct and guess. Language is never free of biases, and this is exploited also in films. A telling example is the use that is made of the onscreen characters' accents to channel particular information. For many decades, the baddies would be portrayed as speaking with a Russian accent, or Arabic, or Latin American Spanish. And this, in effect, is a flagrant case of stereotyping the accent.

Well, in a way it has been done in literature from the old times. One can find stereotyping in Milton's poems.

Stereotyping is a fact of life. We need stereotypes to make sense of the reality out there, otherwise it would be impossible to reason. They are a type of generalization that help us to make things concrete. We cannot talk all the time on too abstract a level, either. And the media excels at creating stereotypes.

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[14]   *VHS vs Communism* (2014), directed by Ilinca Călugăreanu. YouTube: The New York Times. Accessed 5 September 2023: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAxZ08YGzL0>.

It brings us to the question of ethics. There are various ways of understanding ethics in Translation Studies. What would be the ethical aspects of AVT that we can touch upon either when researching into it or when producing translations?

This is a rather complex issue, and we might tackle it from many different angles. The act of translation itself may raise various ethical questions: Would I translate a film or programme that glorifies Nazism or is racist? This is an ethical decision. So, ethical questions are present from the very beginning, when deciding whether to accept, or not, your translation commission. Ethics has been much more discussed in interpreting, where you usually receive a set of deontological guidelines. We do not have such guidelines in AVT. Then there is the question of how you represent people on-screen without betraying the intent of the original, and without incorporating stereotypes or negative connotations that are not present in the original dialogue. This is an area that companies are struggling with now. How should we deal with sensitive language? How can we be true to the message of the original?

A few months back, I was working with a group of Italian dubbing translators. In the original dialogue in *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), a character swears in a rather idiosyncratic manner: 'Holy dogshit.' Yet, the text is rendered in the Italian translation as *porca puttana*, which means 'a whore who is dirty as a pig.' The issue here is that the original does not denigrate women, it does not insult or animalize them, there is no prostitution involved. When we discussed this example in a group class, and despite most of the participants being women, it was not until we drew their attention to it, that they noticed the contrast between the two expressions. The translation was clearly reinforcing stereotypes that were absent in the original, but they are so ingrained in our society that sometimes we do not even notice them.

This brings us to the question of our response. I believe that through analysing real practice, we are able to unmask the stereotypes we use in language. It is true that we might use language without giving a second thought to what we actually utter. But if we look critically into the practice of translation and we notice that the language we use reinforces certain stereotypes, it makes us more conscious about the language we use on a daily basis.

Exactly, and this is something ethical that we can do ourselves as translators. We should be more careful when choosing our words and consider what the impact might be on some social groups—disabled people, members of the LGBTQ+ community, people from ethnic marginalized groups… Some companies are paying now much more attention to these issues than they were in the past and attempting to implement relevant policies.

In one of the earliest pieces of research in this field, by De Marco,[15] there is an interesting example from the film *As Good As it Gets* (1997). In the movie, there is a character, Simon Bishop, who is gay, but we only get to know his sexual orientation rather late in the film. In the Italian version, however, we know it straight away, because he has been dubbed with a very camp intonation.

Another interesting point is how we represent people on-screen. In the case of dubbing, what voices should we use when dealing with certain characters? This is, again, an ethical question. Is it ethical to translate black characters on-screen with white voice talents? Or white characters with black dubbing actors? Should black voice talents dub black people, and white ones dub white actors? What are the concerns that we have to consider?

These days, we have some initiatives where companies are resorting to transgender people to lend their voices to the characters of some films and TV series, as in the case of the Spanish hit *Veneno* (2020),[16] where the three transgender actors in the film are dubbed into English by transgender voice talents.

It is also a way to engage these people into narratives that talk about them.

Indeed. It is not a case of 'we create FOR you' but rather of 'we create WITH you.' And this approach has been long due!

Some theoreticians have pointed out that maybe we do not necessarily feel in the same way when we are not of the same gender or ethnicity, and that these new developments are more about a social move to engage people from various groups, to give them a voice.

I agree, it is a multi-layered question. From a theoretical perspective, it does not make much sense to require that a black person's work has to be translated by a black person, unless you are taking a stand and making a point about the lack of black translators. But I do agree with you that there might be some sensitivities of which we simply are not aware of, or that pass inadvertently to us as translators because we do not belong to that social group. Some people may not see a joke that is homophobic as being insulting or derogatory because they are not from that community. But if you feel part of that social group, you shall probably find it unacceptable and offensive. When it is perceived as something personal that directly touches us, we revolt.

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[15] De Marco, Marcella. 2012. *Audiovisual Translation Through a Gender Lens*. (Approaches to Translation Studies, Volume: 37 / Approaches to Translation Studies Online, Volume: 37). Brill.

[16] A biopic based on the book *¡Digo! Ni puta, ni santa. Las memorias de La Veneno* (2016, FisicalBook), written by the journalist Valeria Vegas.

I think it is also a question of empathy. It does not necessarily mean that we might never understand that there are some nuances, but rather it raises the question of whether we are empathetic enough to realize it.

Yes, of course. That is why we must do our research and be more receptive to the needs of other social groups.

And I guess, the same is true about any access services, is it not? If we think about people who are deaf, hard of hearing or blind...

I fully agree with you. If you are not blind or deaf, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to fully understand their needs, and our default position is usually patronizing—we are 'helping them.' And such an approach can be very dispiriting and off-putting for them. That is why they can be very cagey when we approach them to conduct research on them, as they obviously do not want to be guinea-pigs for our academic pursuits. We really need to break away from this sort of patronizing discourse.

We spoke about how much the audience can be trusted, but there is also the question of how much we can be trusted as researchers.

Absolutely! We could do with a publication on the topic, a PhD, and soon!

We approach these people with our own agenda. Or we want to prove our point. And I guess they can sense it. To some extent, this also relates to the division between researchers and practitioners.

As academics and theoreticians, I fear we might have a rather bad reputation among some practitioners. For many years our approach consisted in comparing the translation with its original, highlighting the errors of the translation and proposing 'better' solutions. The angle has been totally prescriptive, and, in my opinion, it still continues to be such in too many cases. This, of course, has created friction between practitioners and theoreticians, and explains why some people do not trust research or researchers.

We have talked about the positives in research that can inform practice and bring benefits to society as, for instance, calling more attention to discourses that can be denigratory of some social groups. Maybe, as theoreticians, we should improve the way in which we inform practitioners on what benefits we can bring to practice. In other sectors, research informs practice. But in TS, it sometimes feels as if we have separated research from practice, and that causes distrust. We need to change this dynamic.

You have a point there. In my opinion, we should be using research to empower practitioners, and we need to try harder and avoid being too subjective in the discussions we have and criticizing translation solutions. Everybody has bad days, including translators.

This is a human quality.

Yes, doctors have bad days, too. And theoreticians as well. To be honest, I have not seen many academic articles praising translators for good solutions. This has not quite been the angle in research. So, no wonder why some translators do not want to be part of research and be scrutinized. We still need to work on this, as I do not think it has been resolved yet. There is still a lot of distrust out there.

We are talking on the eve of the conference here in Vilnius. I am very grateful for your support for this conference from the very beginning, when we met back in London in 2019 and I just voiced the idea that maybe the focus of the event should be on translation and ideology.

This is a very interesting theme, and very topical.

Why do you think it is important to talk about this in conferences, why is this topic relevant? Is it worth talking about it at all? Is it important to talk about it in Lithuania? Maybe it would have received larger resonance in London, or any other big city.

I think the topic of ideology in translation has been, and will always be, a very important and appealing one. And why not discuss it in Vilnius? International conferences are great events as they allow conversations with colleagues who come from many different countries. Here we are, in Vilnius, with presenters from over 30 countries. They are going to represent different sensitivities, ideological positions, educational and political backgrounds. That is what makes translation so exciting and our work as translators fascinating. We will be discussing lots of issues that go well beyond Lithuania, and we will get into debates that will help us understand how other people perceive reality.

I have been always interested in ideology as this is a part of who we are. It is present not only in translation, but also in politics, education, our daily lives; if you get divorced or have an abortion, it is all ideologically driven.

As translators, we work as conveyers of information. We know what other communities feel like and think. When you translate films, you are bringing new social

behaviours to the living room of other people. On-screen, and ultimately through translation, people can learn that in other countries people can get divorced, or two women can get married, or gay people can kiss publicly… And then, as a translator, you find yourself in-between cultures, with the duty of mediating between the two of them. Sometimes those films get banned and there is not much you can do, but other times you find yourself in the thick of it all, looking for solutions to channel these other ways of living and thinking.

I always thought that history evolves and progresses, but the more I look around me, the more I see that it can also regress. We are certainly experiencing a moment of regression: cultural and ideological. The extent to which right-wing philosophy is expanding is truly alarming. The things that some people say now, and the impunity that surrounds these outbursts is mind-numbing. Just recently, in one of the communities of Spain where the extreme-right shares the power with another party, a fascist politician addressed another member of the local Parliament, who happens to be a disabled lady, in the following manner: 'I would talk to you as if you were a *normal* person.' And it goes unpunished. Behaviour of this nature should not be allowed, and people should lose their jobs straight away. This is not a question of respecting the other's beliefs. Comments of this nature do not belong in democratic systems and cannot be respected. Period. But it seems that nowadays one can be really brutal and disrespectful with their comments, and nothing happens. This is why language is important, because it can easily build up to violence. And we know that from history. Language is not only powerful, but also impactful.

But is it for a translator to decide? If we have to translate, say, a leader of one country who publicly swears or diminishes others, what is our task as translators?

Translation can be seen as a two-edge sword. On the one hand, we can translate such a person and, in this way, expose them for what they are. On the other hand, translation can be used to validate such discourse. It really depends on how the translation is framed. From the perspective of AVT, there are numerous videos circulating in social media in which the subtitles are added to eloquently reflect how terribly inarticulate certain politicians are when they speak. Normally, when dealing with spontaneous language, we subtitle the original utterances in coherent sentences, covering up any incongruities. In these other cases, the subtitles are used to subvert, to expose the deficiencies of the speaker by proving that they cannot have a coherent argument, or, as it were, to string two sentences together. People are becoming more aware of the power of language. Yes, we are translating 'the enemy,' people we do not agree with, but we are using translation to show them in a negative light. It all depends on how you use

translation, though I have to agree that it is very challenging to translate people who do not deserve to be heard.

Probably that is why we should keep raising these questions and be always on alert as translators.

And, now, more than ever.

Thank you very much for this engaging conversation and your generous time.

Thank you.