Audiovisual translation studies

Achievements, trends, and challenges

Jorge Díaz Cintas & Aline Remael. *Subtitling: Concepts and Practices*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2021. 292 pp.

Irene Ranzato & Serenella Zanotti, eds. *Reassessing Dubbing: Historical Approaches and Current Trends*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2019. 287 pp.

Anna Matamala & Pilar Orero, eds. *Researching Audio Description: New Approaches*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 328 pp.

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In a digital society, audiovisual translation (AVT) plays a critical role in making multimedia material accessible, and in doing so, has become an increasingly important field of study. Over the years, several approaches have been observed in AVT: historical research, linguistic and multimodal studies, cultural studies, sociological studies, AVT pedagogy, and accessibility studies. Recently, there has also been a boom in experimental cognitive research, thus shifting from descriptive case studies to attempts at establishing evidence-based knowledge (Díaz Cintas and Szarkowska 2020).

Published over a five-year period, the three books reviewed in this essay investigate a variety of AVT modes. These volumes complement one another in that they cover the most common AVT practices: subtitling, dubbing, and audio description (AD). Reviewing these works in conjunction enables us to gain a deeper understanding of the achievements, trends, and challenges in AVT studies.

Subtitling: Concepts and Practices (2021), written by Jorge Díaz Cintas and Aline Remael, investigates the current state of subtitling research and practice while also looking ahead to future avenues of investigation. In exploring the challenges of subtitling – such as the linguistic and technical features of this specific type of AVT – the authors cover a range of case studies conducted in a number of countries to illustrate how various translation issues are addressed along with practical subtitling strategies. Spanning nine chapters, the book addresses the impact of cutting-edge translation technologies on the profession, as well as

their ability to overcome the multilingual, multicultural, and sociopolitical constraints that audiovisual productions and their translations face today.

The collection *Reassessing Dubbing: Historical Approaches and Current Trends* (2019), edited by Irene Ranzato and Serenella Zanotti, offers a multifaceted appraisal of dubbing, describing linguistic, historical, professional, technological, and ideological concerns. As the editors attest, this collection aims to increase the visibility of dubbing in AVT research and provides a historical overview of the practice and an outline of present and future trajectories. The volume comprises 15 chapters, grouped in four different sections, namely: historical approaches, new trends in dubbing research and practice, the linguistics of dubbing, and identity construction in dubbing.

The third collection under review, *Researching Audio Description: New Approaches* (2016), edited by Anna Matamala and Pilar Orero, approaches AD from the standpoint of the many aspects of film narrative and language, including its terminology and production. The collection brings together 15 contributions, thematically arranged into three groups: accessibility, the theory and practice of audio description, and specific audio description cases. This publication aims to take stock of a panoramic view of novel approaches to AD studies, with perhaps its greatest contribution being a thorough analysis of the key factors that should be considered when creating AD scripts.

Together, these three books overlap in their emphasis of important strands of research in the field, including historical research, linguistic studies, cultural studies, applied research, and cognitive experimental studies. Generally speaking, historical studies of AVT focus on technical processes, translation practices, and marketing strategies, all of which are intertwined. Charting AVT's history, Chapter 1 of *Subtitling: Concepts and Practices* stresses the growing importance of AVT in the field of translation studies. The authors define what subtitling is today, differentiate it from other modalities of AVT, and provide a categorization of subtitles. They also mention the rapid technological advances in subtitling and the expectation that professionals embrace new techniques such as specialized software, memory tools, machine translation, and cloud-based platforms, which ultimately emphasizes that adaptability and flexibility are vital to the success of subtitlers.

In her chapter in *Reassessing Dubbing: Historical Approaches and Current Trends*, Rocío Baños provides an overview of the phenomenon of fandubbing. Inspired by the concept of *cybersubtitles* (Díaz Cintas 2018), she suggests that *cyberdubbing* represents the various types of non-traditional online dubbing activity, involving dubbing by internet users, fans, and digital influencers, regardless of whether they are created amateurs or specialists, or whether the dubbing is to comedic or more serious ends.

In their contribution to *Researching Audio Description: New Approaches*, Phatteera Sarakornborrirak and Kulnaree Sueroj focus specifically on television broadcasting and argue that AD is nascent in its development in Thailand. In addition, the authors describe how the earliest steps have been taken toward unrestricted access to media broadcasting in an effort to increase accessibility for individuals with disabilities. The lag in development could be due to a lack of awareness of the rights of such individuals as viewers, but also to the absence of media regulations that require license-holders to offer AD to the visually impaired.

Linguistically-oriented AVT studies in *Subtitling: Concepts and Practices* focus on understanding how professionals translate texts, emphasizing the different communicative layers that make up language. Chapter 6 examines the linguistic dimension and defines this professional practice as a form of textual localization that requires rewriting and the application of translation techniques such as condensation, reformulation, and omission that are employed due to time and space constraints in subtitled productions. Chapter 7 mainly describes the concept of linguistic variation and offers a pragmatic classification of AVT and related subtitling strategies.

As in *Subtitling: Concepts and Practices*, the edited collection *Reassessing Dubbing: Historical Approaches and Current Trends* deals with linguistic features. A most noteworthy chapter is by Sofía Sánchez-Mompeán on the role of prosodic variation in dubbing. In her contribution, she examines the choices made by dubbing actors. Based on her research and using numerous examples, the relevance of four prosodic systems – namely "pitch-direction, pitch-range, loudness, and tempo" (191) – is scrutinized along with their pragmatic implications in English and Spanish.

Several contributions in the volumes under review address cultural approaches in AVT, which concentrate on many of the topics regularly associated with the cultural turn: concepts of "ideology, otherness, post-colonialism, power, resistance, patronage and censorship, bringing to the fore issues of identity, gender stereotypes, race, etc." (Chaume 2018: 42). Chapter 8 of *Subtitling: Concepts and Practices* covers different definitions and taxonomies of cultural references that appear in audiovisual material, including the subtitling challenges they pose, potential solutions, and the impact resulting from any ideological manipulation in subtitling.

In her contribution to *Reassessing Dubbing: Historical Approaches and Current Trends*, Nolwenn Mingant examines the strategies American distributors used while dubbing Hollywood films into the Middle Eastern and Arabic languages for the North African markets. Despite the economic interests in the region, the initiatives in question were short-lived, due to insurmountable political difficulties.

Carla Mereu Keating's chapter also explores the political implications of dubbing by reconstructing "the origins, establishment, and fortune of Italy's mainstream AVT practice" (63). She shows how the intertwining of cultural, commercial, linguistic, and political challenges had long-term influences on the development of the Italian AVT industry. Debora Ciampi delves into the dubbing strategies used to translate sensitive topics (e.g., sexuality, drugs, and violence) in American teen films for Italian viewers. The study shows that in an approach substantially different from previous decades, sensitive topics are maintained rather than treated euphemistically, leading to the display of licentious and uninhibited behavior that was not readily accepted in Italian audiovisual media only a few years ago. Still other case studies are present in the volumes under discussion. For example, after an in-depth discussion of advertising, ideology, and translation, Pilar Orero and José Dávila-Montes's contribution to *Researching Audio Description: New Approaches* investigates AD strategies for commercial brands and advertising by conducting a qualitative analysis of the translation methods used in three films.

Although applied research aiming to increase media accessibility is underrepresented in the other two titles, *Researching Audio Description: New Approaches* includes coverage of national and international projects that focus on this humanitarian area. For example, Pilar Orero presents two European projects, namely "Digital Television for All" and "Hybrid Broadcast Broadband for All." Both aim to facilitate access to digital TV by promoting media accessibility in a connected TV environment across the EU. Anna Matamala summarizes the Spanish-funded ALST project, which advocates for the application of machine translation, speech recognition, and text-to-speech in AD. Agnieszka Szarkowska, Anna Jankowska, Krzysztof Krejtz, and Jarosław Kowalski provide an insight into the Polish "Modern Art for All" project, for which they developed a unique multimedia guide app for people with and without sensory disabilities, to be used in museums and galleries to facilitate accessibility. Gian Maria Greco claims that accessibility should not be seen as "relating to the limited, albeit an important, area of the human rights of persons with disabilities," but rather should include "the promotion of human rights as a whole for all" (28). Finally, an overview of the current state of accessibility of games is presented by Carme Mangiron and Xiaochun Zhang, with particular emphasis on the AD of games for blind and visually impaired players. They explore video games adapted for the blind and visually impaired players from a reception perspective and advocate the promotion and application of AD in video games to increase accessibility in a field that has traditionally lagged behind in this respect.

More cognitive, experimental approaches are reflected in both *Reassessing Dubbing: Historical Approaches and Current Trends* and *Researching Audio*

Description: New Approaches. According to Chaume, the main objective of cognitive and empirical AVT studies is to:

> analyse what happens in the translator's or audience's brains, to get inside their black box in order to unveil the reasons behind decisions, feelings, and way of facing and tackling a translation or consuming a certain translated audiovisual text, bringing feelings and body response to the surface. (Chaume 2018: 54)

In this context, in *Reassessing Dubbing*, Elena Di Giovanni and Pablo Romero-Fresco use eye-tracking technology to compare viewers' behavior when watching the original English version with subtitles of *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014) and the dubbed Italian version. Arguably one of the most exciting chapters of this volume, the findings suggest that audiences pay less attention to lip-synching and exhibit greater visual momentum when viewing the dubbed film – i.e., they scan the images at a higher pace than those who view the original. In addition, viewers gaze less at the characters' mouths and more at their eyes, immersing themselves in the viewing experience even when lip-synching is imperfect, thereby supporting the presence of a "dubbing effect." In a similar vein, Iwona Mazur and Agnieszka Chmiel use eye-tracking technology and feedback from blind users to investigate whether AD should reflect the ways sighted viewers perceive images when watching films. Based on their results, the two scholars argue:

> AD should at least take into consideration the perception of sighted viewers, which might make the viewing experience of those who had followed the AD more similar to that of the sighted audience. As a result, AD could better serve its purpose of replacing lost or impaired vision. (Mazur and Chmiel 2019: 116)

Although the books under review cover a wide range of subjects, there are inevitably some topics that fall outside the scope of these titles. First, there is a relative paucity of sociological AVT studies that investigate the translator's identity, socio-economic status, lifestyle and attitudes, other agents' attitudes toward the translator, and the role of translation in the context of social events. Second, compared to *Subtitling: Concepts and Practices*, a potential pitfall of *Reassessing Dubbing: Historical Approaches and Current Trends* and *Researching Audio Description: New Approaches* is its largely Eurocentric remit, focusing almost exclusively on European scholarship. In these volumes, only two chapters in total are based on research conducted in non-European countries These contributions could be enriched by incorporating additional, emerging practices that are increasingly prevalent in Asia, such as TikTok content localization, *danmu/danmaku* subtitling, fan dubbing, and fun dubbing. Third, another area that merits further attention is the challenges that are brought forth as a consequence of the intersection between semiotic and linguistic codes in AVT material. The

research community largely agrees that the audience normally processes the utterances with the help of different semiotic cues: music, images, and written characters that are part of the multimodal nature of audiovisual messages. Hence, it would have been beneficial to include contributions that examine whether viewers are able to extract the crucial information from the images or the sound of an audiovisual program so that translators do not necessarily have to translate utterances such as cultural references, proper names, and swear words. Fourth, while it is exciting to see cognitive empirical reception studies on AVT included in *Reassessing Dubbing: Historical Approaches and Current Trends* and *Researching Audio Description: New Approaches*, it is important to consider the ecological validity of these experiments. There is a trade-off between mimicking real-world settings and conducting experiments with strict rigor, with the study design or materials used serving as the basis for generalizability (Mellinger and Hanson 2022). As such, more methodological reflection on AVT scholarship would help to nuance the results and enhance our understanding of cognitive aspects of AVT (see Greco, Jankowska, and Szarkowska 2022). Incidentally, none of the contributions under review contain cognitive experimental research apart from the aforementioned reception studies. Last but not least, *Subtitling: Concepts and Practices* successfully achieves its aims insofar as it remains up to date in terms of the very recent developments that it covers, even though these will no doubt continue to expand quickly. Examples are its discussion of live subtitling, creative subtitling, and activist subtitling. However, the book does not incorporate such new developments into real subtitling practice. Due to its focus on traditional commercial subtitling, the book is, therefore, somewhat conservative in this respect.

As a whole, the three books reviewed trace and predict some exciting achievements, popular trends, and thought-provoking challenges in AVT, refining and deepening conventional concepts, approaches, and frameworks, while also broadening our perception of the most common modalities of AVT: subtitling, dubbing, and AD. The most distinctive and positive feature of the books lies in their "interdisciplinary framework, integration of theoretical approaches, and triangulation of methods" (Matamala and Orero 2016: 15), which remains highly recommended when conducting research on practices as intricate as AVT. Some of the innovative approaches that have emerged in AVT research will have important methodological implications for the future interdisciplinary study of this field of knowledge. For example, eye-tracking will remain an important tool to conduct empirical and cognitive studies (e.g., reception or process research). However, these measures only offer an indirect indication of cognitive processing since fixation cannot always be interpreted as information processing, whereas its absence should not be interpreted as the absence of processing, which is also explained in Jakobsen's "dog-on-a-leash" theory (2014: 74). Methodologies using eye-tracking

are likely to be integrated with other biosensors, such as electroencephalography (EEG) or functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), that could yield valuable instant information on cognitive processing. Such implications may, of course, inspire future studies to innovate methodologically.

In conclusion, the books under review present a rich and insightful portrayal of the ever-evolving world of AVT, illuminating its past, present, and future with remarkable depth and breadth. Their interdisciplinary framework, integration of theoretical perspectives, and use of cutting-edge research methods make them a valuable guide for navigating the opportunities and challenges ahead. These books will inspire future researchers and practitioners to push even further the borders of AVT, leading to new discoveries and a more profound understanding of the role of language and media in human communication.

Acknowledgments

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