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**Subtitling: the long journey to academic acknowledgement**

**ABSTRACT**

The present article is part of a wider translation project from Spanish carried out by Juan Abad, Judith Harling, Yuka Miyakita, Mark Seager and Christina Wiggins, students at the University of Surrey Roehampton.

Audiovisual translation seems to have been absent from academic exchanges on translation until very recently. Focusing solely on subtitling, this article starts by taking a look at the reasons behind this state of affairs. It then presents the reader with a detailed account of the research that has taken place in this field, both outside and in Spain. After an overview of the topics, figures, publications and conferences that have had an impact on subtitling, the paper points to the direction of possible avenues of research. Although the future seems very promising for this field of research, the article finishes with a section highlighting some of the challenges that lie ahead of us.

**KEYWORDS**

Subtitling, audiovisual translation, screen translation, translation historiography.

## **1. Introduction**

A clear paradox exists which emphasises the surprising imbalance between the little research on audiovisual translation and its enormous impact on society. In numerical terms, the translation carried out in the audiovisual realm is the most important translational activity of our time. Firstly, because of the high number of people it reaches, mainly through television. Secondly, because of the large quantity of translated products which cross over to other cultures: documentaries, films, news, debates, concerts, television series, etc. Thirdly, because of the immediacy of its reception: television, cinema, DVD. In a context where the exchanges are so great, and in a period in which all the experts are in agreement that subtitles are bound to play an increasingly more important and prominent role in our societies, the elaboration of detailed studies which analyse the history and socio-cultural implications of this activity seems imperative. The predicted dominance of subtitling seems justified by virtue of cost – more economical than dubbing –, and execution speed since dubbing requires the participation of more professionals. I will now comment on some of the factors which have contributed to this academic neglect.

## 2. Research difficulties

The recurring question of whether we are faced with a case of translation or adaptation has led many people to avoid this field of study altogether, as they consider it outside the scope of translation. Authors like Whitman-Linsen (1992:17) have echoed this situation and have highlighted an urgent necessity “to dispel the disdain of literary intelligentsia, who seem to dismiss film translating and the degree of difficulty involved in it as not worthy of their attention”. Many of the translation concepts and theories that have been historically articulated cease to be functional when scholars try and apply them to AVT. This has traditionally led scholars to focus on the analysis of less complex empirical phenomena, instead of complicating their academic life with the re-elaboration of existing postulates or the development of new theories capable of accounting for the specificity of AVT. This lack of research is responsible for the perception of AVT as a marginal activity, mainly if compared to the translation of canonical works such as the Bible and literary classics. Throughout history, translation has played a very important role in cultural exchanges, and yet its study is relatively recent. Even in its most glamorous and canonical dimension, translation has been absent from academic exchanges and so it is not surprising that studies into AVT are even more neglected.

Another obstacle lies in the polymorphic nature of audiovisual programmes. It is not as laborious to work with two written texts, in the source and target languages, as it is to work with dialogue lists, videotapes or DVDs, television sets, video players, etc. Furthermore, we encounter the added difficulty that access to work materials is often restricted. The film scripts published by certain companies are usually pre-production versions, and they rarely coincide with the dialogue of the actors on the screen. The same occurs with the dialogue lists found on the Internet. One of the first tasks when carrying out research is to check that printed and soundtrack dialogue coincide. Otherwise, we shall have to transcribe it from screen, a tedious and time-consuming task. The ideal would be to work with the dialogue continuity – post-production version – in which all dialogue is transcribed verbatim as it is heard on screen. These documents do exist but are not sold commercially, and some producers and distributors can be reluctant to hand out copies of them.

Even if we have a complete and detailed dialogue list, we would still need a printed copy of the subtitles. Subtitles of foreign films are never commercialised and the transcription from screen is necessary, unless we can rip them or we know the person who has

done the translation and they provide us with a copy. We will have to confirm that the subtitles given to us coincide with those on-screen, since they could have been reworked by an adaptor. Some translators may refuse to offer their translations for various reasons. It can be that they only carried out the translation, leaving the composition of subtitles in the hands of another professional. Or it could be that the rights to the translation have been handed over to the distributor or subtitling studio, and they have no control over them. In other situations, it is a case of mere personal reluctance. There are too many studies in which a source text and target text are compared, with the sole apparent objective of criticising the *bad* solutions reached in the translation and to propose alternatives which are indisputably *better* in the eyes of the scholar. It goes without saying that approaches of this type do not foster good relations between professionals and academics working in translation. Subtitling is a team activity and it makes it difficult to ascertain who has been ultimately responsible for the translation that we as an audience consume. On more than a few occasions, the translator is accused of a badly translated subtitle when in fact he is not responsible for what we read on the screen. The study of the discrepancies between the translation supplied by the translator and the adjusted subtitles is an area of research which could shed light on the power struggles taking place during the decision-making process.

When we want to analyse the dubbed and the subtitled versions of the same film, the method of work can be somewhat cumbersome. When the product is in video format, one has to work with two television sets in order to see the two tapes at the same time, or with a single television set and look for alternative ways of working. One possibility is to record the dubbed version onto an audio tape that one can listen to at the same time as viewing the original subtitled version of the film.

This combination of difficulties is the reason why some researchers may end up studying audiovisual productions that are not necessarily the most appealing or the most fruitful in terms of research. The lack of access to the necessary material can sometimes force the choice of other objects of study easier to obtain. However, and compared to dubbing, the acquisition of research material in the case of subtitles is relatively easy, as the tape always contains the original soundtrack as well as the subtitles in the target language.

One of the main obstacles in our research resides in the duality of media. The message is transmitted *audio+visually*. In order to be able to appreciate the success or failure of a certain solution, not

only do we need to know what is said in the original, but we should also know how it is said and what is being done in the original. For a long time now, translation scholars have highlighted the need of knowing the co-text and the context to be able to assess a particular translation. If we want to investigate products of an audiovisual nature, we should turn to academic discourses which also combine the visual with the auditory. And although it is certain that in conferences and talks it is relatively easy (and economical) to give a presentation supported by visual aids, it is not so easy (and far less economical) for an article or book to be accompanied by audiovisual material. The researchers then have to rely on the long and detailed explanation of what is happening on screen so as to be able to contextualise the solution reached, with the risk of spending more time locating the reader than commenting on the virtues of the translation.

It is obvious, however, that there have been studies on AVT and that there will be many more. The high interest in conducting research into this area can be seen as a natural and expected development linked to the power that the image holds in our society and that Lambert (1990:228) summarises in the following way: “[L]es langues, les textes, même les littératures sortent de plus en plus du royaume des livres pour entrer dans le royaume de l’audiovisuel”. Every day we see more publications and conferences that focus on AVT. Given the youth and stamina of most of the researchers, the future of this branch of study could not be more promising.

### **3. Research into AVT, research into subtitling**

When it comes to studying the different AVT modes, there has been a tendency to group them all together, when on occasions their study would gain in depth and substance if they were carried out individually. Although they share common characteristics, the differences that distinguish them call for a more specific approach. The reduction is fundamental to subtitling but not so much to dubbing; the translation of exclamations and interjections is not a problem in subtitling, but it is critical in dubbing; the shift from oral to written does not occur in dubbing; the problems of linguistic variation are practically irresolvable in subtitling; the translation of expletives is much more urgent in subtitling than in dubbing; the coexistence of the two languages in the subtitled version has an impact on the translation of subtitles that has no parallel in dubbing, etc.

The fact that subtitling has always been absent from the main translation theories does not mean that it has not been researched.

Gottlieb (2002) has compiled more than 1300 bibliographical references on interlingual subtitling published between 1929 and 2000, although most of them have appeared in recent years. Entries refer only to subtitling with a small number of works that focus on dubbing or voice-over but dedicate a substantial part to subtitling.

A direct relationship between quality and quantity cannot obviously be established, and it is true that there tends to be some fragmentation and repetition of contributions in our area. Many of the articles are brief and focus on somewhat stale ideas such as the confrontation between dubbing and subtitling. There is also a scattering of material that has appeared published in cinema and translation journals, as well as in newspapers and weekly magazines. On occasions we come across manuscripts that have been passed around without ever having been published (Laks 1957 and Minchinton 1986). Sometimes they are in-house documents that never reach the hands of the general public. Where it concerns monographic books, most of them have been published by small publishing houses, where the distribution is usually very erratic. In the early 1990s, the *European Institute for the Media* (EIM) in Düsseldorf had a section in its library dedicated to AVT. Unfortunately, it stopped compiling these publications and at present there is no other international organisation having taken over the reigns. The scattering of material has not only made the bibliographical search complicated for a researcher starting in this area, but it also means that some scholars have carried out their work without knowing what others had already done in the field.

Given the limitations of this paper, the two following sections have to be selective with regards to the choice of names and works that I will deal with. My aim is to offer a detailed view of the contributions and scholars that, in one way or another, have had a great impact on research done solely and exclusively into subtitling. For this reason, the names of certain researchers have deliberately been excluded as they have not studied subtitling at all, or only in passing. The advantage to me is that it is a relatively new subdiscipline to which few scholars have so far dedicated their efforts. The disadvantage is that it is an area attracting more and more interest, making it difficult to keep up to date with everything that is published.

#### **4. Research outside of Spain**

The first academic articles to deal with AVT from a translational perspective appeared in the late 1950s and early 1960s. A special edition of the magazine *Babel*, published in 1960 under the title *Cinéma et traduction*, marks a symbolic starting point, even though

already in its first volume of 1956 the journal *Le linguiste/De taalkundige* had dealt with the subject very superficially in a couple of pages under the title *Traduction et Cinéma*.

One of the first, if not the first, pioneering works on subtitling was carried out by Laks (1957) who wrote *Le sous-titrage des films. Sa technique. Son esthétique*. Unfortunately, it is a manuscript that was never published but it seems to have circulated with a certain ease, as it appears referenced in a great number of subsequent publications.

The decades of the 1960s and 1970s are characterised by a pronounced lethargy regarding subtitling, although some articles appear on dubbing. We have to wait until 1974 to come across a significant article that focuses solely on subtitling. Written by Dollerup, the article delves into the different types of errors that arise in the subtitling of television programmes from English to Danish. Dollerup's greatest contribution is his passing mention of the pedagogical value that subtitles have in the learning of foreign languages. This area has since been researched by authors such as Danan (1992) and Caimi (2002), but it still requires a more systematic and detailed analysis.

One of the articles that has left the deepest impression has been that of Marleau (1982). Titled "Le sous-titres... un mal nécessaire", it was later taken up in Spanish by Mayoral Asensio (1993). After offering a diachronic vision of the use of language in cinema, starting with the invention of cinema and the use of intertitles, Marleau focuses on the different problems that surround this practice and categorises them under four headings: technological, psychological, artistic-aesthetic and linguistic. He offers some orthotypographical recommendations on the presentation of the subtitles and transcends the linguistic dimension by talking about economic factors, the film industry and the different professionals that take part in the process.

An article published in the same year is that by Titford which, despite being a brief contribution, has made a significant impact. The author introduces the concept of *constrained translation* while talking about subtitling, as he considers that the problems that surround this translation practice "derive essentially from the constraints imposed on the translator by the medium itself" (1982:113). With the focus of the article on subtitling, Titford does not seem to be conscious of the terminological value of his proposals and it will be Mayoral Asensio, Kelly and Gallardo (1988) who will make this concept of *constrained translation* applicable to a myriad of translation practices.

Reid is a prolific writer at the end of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s. From a distinctive professional perspective, her main interests focus on the relationship between the public and the subtitles, as well as on the figure of the subtitler. Her article of 1978 is an apology in defence of subtitles, which she considers to be *the intelligent solution*.

In 1987, under the auspices of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), a *Conference on Dubbing and Subtitling* took place in Stockholm. It was the first congress ever held on the subject and acted as a trigger to the explosion of conferences and publications on AVT. One of the major achievements was a proposal of non-binding guidelines to facilitate the exchange, purchase and sales of television programmes to be subtitled. They can be found in Ivarsson and Carroll (1998:160).

From a Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS) approximation, Delabastia (1989) offers a detailed study of the various signs and channels that make up a film and have to be taken into account when dubbing and subtitling. In his search for the norms that underlie translation behaviour, the focus of his study is primarily cultural, but without renouncing the analysis of translation as a process. Of special interest is his list of questions that should guide the inquisitive mind of every AVT researcher.

In the same year and with a similar title to Delabastia's article but in French, Lambert published a panoramic work on the power that mass media has over our contemporary societies and, more specifically, on the role played by language and translation. He holds the debateable opinion that the developments that we are experiencing will bring about the end of monolingualism and the arrival of multilingualism. From a subtitling point of view, his article of 1990 is more interesting and offers a detailed account of the various characteristics that define the subtitling discourse.

AVT's golden age starts in the 90s. In this decade, we witness a true (r)evolution in our field. Curiously, this new period also marked a change of language, with French practically disappearing in academic exchanges and with the almost exclusive, dangerous dominance of English.

At the turn of the decade two essential books appear almost at the same time. Luyken, in collaboration with four professionals from different European countries, publishes the book *Overcoming Language Barriers in Television* in 1991. A project financed by the EIM, it analyses the different translation modes applied to the

linguistic transfer of audiovisual products, although the emphasis is underlined in the subtitle of the book: "dubbing and subtitling for the European audience". The approach is markedly professional, and for the first time, statistics about the volume of translated programmes, labour costs and audience preferences are compiled in a systematic way.

A year later, in 1992, the first book ever to deal exclusively with subtitling, *Subtitling for the Media*, came out in English translated from Swedish. Ivarsson had worked as a subtitler for Swedish public television, and the book benefits from his exhaustive knowledge of the professional details. He also offers a very detailed history of the technical aspects of subtitling and an overview of subtitling for the deaf and hard-of-hearing. The subtitle of the work, *A Handbook of an Art*, is symptomatic of the kind of approach that has prevailed in this field and that, in my opinion, has not been particularly beneficial. This conception of *art* serves only to distance subtitling from educational centres. It seems to transmit the romantic idea of an artistic talent that one has or does not have, but can hardly be acquired. Some people are born with the gift to be a subtitler and others are not. In 1998, with the help of Carroll, a revised second edition was published, benefiting from a rigorous update with the incorporation of the latest technical developments, such as DVD, and with a title much more sober and concise: *Subtitling*.

Gambier is one of the leading figures in AVT. He has devoted a great deal of effort to the classification of the various AVT modes, the skills of would-be subtitlers and the reception of AVT. He has taken part in most of the conferences organised in this field, has been president of the few international associations on AVT (FIT-Media and ESIST), and has edited a large number of collective volumes: (1995), (1996), (1998) and (2001).

Tomaszkiewicz (1993) has written and published her doctoral thesis in French, and it focuses on the linguistic operations that underlie the practice of subtitling from French into Polish. After an introduction to the general problems of translating for cinema, she carries out a detailed analysis of the two strategies that in her opinion characterise the subtitling of films: elimination and condensation. Kovačič has generally researched the linguistic aspects of subtitling. Her most interesting contribution is the application of the theory of relevance to the study of subtitling (1994).

Dries had a particularly productive period in the mid 90s when she worked as a researcher in the EIM. Apart from compiling research material on AVT and making it available in the library of the EIM,

Dries published articles on the problems and obstacles that linguistic diversity in Europe presents for the free circulation of audiovisual products *made in Europe*. One of her objectives is the raising of linguistic awareness of all professionals working in the audiovisual industry. Thanks to her, we have a fairly detailed mapping of the different national practices of mainland Europe, in which she makes room for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. In her most interesting contribution (1995), she recommends a series of guidelines aimed at promoting the production and distribution of dubbed and subtitled programmes.

Gottlieb also begins his career in the research of subtitling in the 90s. He is definitely one of the scholars that has most formally theorised about this area, having dealt with the linguistic dimension of subtitles, the translation of idioms from English into Danish, the training and teaching of subtitling and, more recently, the corruption of the Danish language by English through subtitled and dubbed films. The volumes of 1997 and 2001 collate the vast majority of his articles to this date.

In 1999, the book *The Semiotics of Subtitling*, by de Linde and Kay, was released. The work centres on the intralingual subtitling (English-English) that is carried out in the UK for the deaf and hard-of-hearing, delving in the main characteristics that define this kind of subtitling, the interaction between text and image, the differences between an adult and an infant audience and the reception of subtitles. It is a reference work for all those interested in this other type of subtitling.

In an attempt to go beyond the linguistic level and to set AVT firmly in the target culture, Karamitroglou (2000) publishes his doctoral thesis, *Towards a Methodology for the Investigation of Norms in Audiovisual Translation*. Using concepts such as *polysystem* and *norms*, he proposes a model of analysis that he himself applies, in a case study, to find out the preliminary norms that determine the choice of subtitling or dubbing when translating children's programmes in Greece. His main contribution lies in the fact that he makes use of very up to date translation concepts and applies them to the field of AVT, extending their functionality and expanding the possibilities of study in our field to the professional, commercial and product reception dimensions.

At international level, it can be said that AVT in general and subtitling in particular are in a good state of health. There have been numerous conferences on AVT, with their emphasis generally on subtitling, since a great deal of speakers are from countries in the north of Europe where subtitling is the most common practice of

AVT. Most of these contributions have been published in proceedings. Without wanting to be exhaustive, it is worth mentioning the following:

1995. *Communication audiovisuelle et transferts linguistiques*, Strasbourg. Edited by Gambier (1995).
1995. *Traduzione multimediale per il cinema, la televisione e la scena*, Forli. Edited by Heiss and Bollettieri Bosinelli (1996).
1996. *Languages and the Media*, Berlin. Edited by Gambier (1998).
1997. *Multimedia and Translation*, Rimini. Edited by Gambier and Gottlieb (2001).
1997. *Seminar on Audio-visual Translation*, University of Geneva.
1998. *Languages and the Media II, Quality and Standards in Audiovisual Language Transfer*, Berlin. Edited by Gambier and Gottlieb (2001).
2000. *Languages and the Media III, Converging Markets and Multimedia*, Berlin.
2001. *Cinema: Paradiso delle lingue. I sottotitoli nell'apprendimento linguistico*, University of Pavia. Edited by Caimi (2002).
2001. *International Conference on Dubbing and Subtitling in a World Context*, Chinese University of Hong Kong.
2002. *The Art of Film Translation*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London.
2002. *Languages and the Media IV, Viewers, Languages and Marketing*, Berlin.
2004. *In So Many Words: Language Transfer on the Screen*. Federal University of Surrey, London.

The International Federation of Translators has been one of the first organisations to recognise AVT's specificity with the creation in 1987, on the occasion of the FIT World Congress in Maastricht, of the Committee for Media Translators and Interpreters ([www.fit-ift.org/media](http://www.fit-ift.org/media)).

It is also worth highlighting the creation in 1995 of the *European Association for Studies in Screen Translation* (ESIST), which serves as a meeting and reference point for researchers, teachers and professionals of AVT. Despite the inclusion of the adjective European in its name, the association has a clear international vocation, as shown by the membership of people from other corners of the world, such as America, Asia and Australia. One of the most ambitious projects that the association has carried out has been its *International Comparative Subtitling Project*. Three short scenes from different genres were distributed to companies from all over the world with the aim of profiling the different national practices in subtitling. They were asked to subtitle the three scenes, applying the same conventions that they usually apply when

subtitling their programmes. They were also asked to answer a short questionnaire. Around 50 companies worldwide took part in the project, representing a total of 18 languages and more than 20 different countries. The material is available for those interested in using it for research purposes and can be obtained by contacting the secretary of ESIST ([www.esist.org](http://www.esist.org)).

## 5. Research in Spain

The situation for subtitling is good and for AVT is buoyant, with dubbing as the most researched area in Spain. It could be asserted that in many aspects, Spanish researchers are carrying the torch at an international level. The dynamism observed in Spain, visible as much in the large number of publications that have appeared, as in the proliferation of congresses and public and private university courses, is currently unparalleled by any other country.

One of the first researchers to study subtitling in a systematic and rigorous way has been Mayoral Asensio who begins to publish at the early date of 1984. His article in collaboration with Kelly and Gallardo (1988) has been one of the most quoted in our field. Working with the term *constrained translation* – coined by Titford in 1982 – the authors establish a taxonomy of the various degrees of subordination that the different translating practices are subjected to. His seminal article from 1993 gives a complete vision of subtitling and it is essential reading for anyone who wants to start out in this field. In 2001, he writes a detailed account of the research done on the subject of AVT and offers a listing of training courses in Spain and other European countries.

Chaume is another of the main figures in the study of AVT. Without focusing exclusively on subtitling, he has published numerous articles on the teaching and learning dimensions, the profession, the semiotic value of the image and the way cinematographic language works. In an academic context in which, however sad it is, scholars from translation and cinema studies tend to ignore each other, Chaume's success has been in trying to bridge the gap between both disciplines by foregrounding the interdisciplinarity of AVT. The highest exposure of this praiseworthy approach is found in his works of 2000 and 2003.

My doctoral thesis (1997), the first one in Spain to deal exclusively with subtitling, follows the Descriptive Translation Studies postulates and is a detailed study of this cultural practice that transcends the merely linguistic approach. I have written numerous articles ranging from the analysis of subtitles that have appeared in certain films, to the proposal of models for the analysis of subtitles,

as well as contributions on the teaching of subtitling. *La traducción audiovisual: el subtitulado* (2001) was the first book ever to be published on this subject in Spanish. *Teoría y práctica de la subtitulación: inglés/español* (2003) is a pioneering book that comes with a DVD with clips from several films and a subtitling programme for people to create and simulate their own subtitles.

An area that has seen a dramatic rise in the number of researchers has been the writing of doctoral theses. Fuentes Luque (2000) analyses the reception of humour in one of the Marx Brothers films, both in the dubbed and the subtitled versions. Santamaría Guinot (2001) focuses on the difficulties that arise when subtitling cultural references from English into Catalan. The many doctoral theses in the process of being written in Spain and other countries serves to highlight the interest that AVT is awakening in young researchers and allows us to be optimistic about the future.

Many conferences have taken place in Spain and although none of them has focused exclusively on subtitling, all of them have made room for papers and panels on the subject. Most of these conferences have published volumes of the proceedings:

- 1993. *Transvases culturales: literatura, cine, traducción*, University of the Basque Country, Vitoria. Edited by Eguíluz et al. (1994).
- 1996. *Simposium de localización multimedia*, University of Granada. Edited by Mayoral and Tejada (1997).
- 1996. *Trasvases culturales: literatura, cine, traducción 2*, University of the Basque Country, Vitoria. Edited by Santamaría et al. (1997).
- 1999. *I Tertulia de trujimanes: traducción audiovisual*, University Alfonso X El Sabio, Madrid.
- 1999. *V Jornades sobre la traducció: la traducció audio-visual al segle XXI*, University Jaume I, Castellón. Edited by Agost and Chaume (2001).
- 1999. *Novas perspectivas na traducción audio-visual*, University of Vigo.
- 1999. *I Jornadas de doblaje y subtitulación*, University of Alicante. Edited by Sanderson (2001).
- 1999. *Trasvases culturales: literatura, cine, traducción 3*, Vitoria. Edited by Pajares et al. (2001).
- 2000. *II Jornadas de doblaje y subtitulación*, University of Alicante. Edited by Sanderson (2001).
- 2001. *I Congreso SETAM*, University Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona.
- 2001. *III Jornadas de doblaje y subtitulación*, University of Alicante. Edited by Sanderson (2002).
- 2002. *Traducir para la pantalla. II Seminario Interdisciplinar sobre Traducción Especializada*, University Europea de Madrid.

2003. *Jornada de traducción audiovisual: las traducciones fantásticas*, University Autònoma de Barcelona.

Interest in AVT has brought about the creation in 1999 of the *Seminario de Estudios sobre la Traducción Audiovisual y Multimedia* (SETAM), a thematic group that brings together five Catalan speaking universities with interests on the research, teaching and professional dimensions of AVT. The association is open to people from other national and international universities ([www.vives.org/setam](http://www.vives.org/setam)).

It is also worth mentioning the success of the e-group TRAG, created by Castro Roig in 2000. This e-mail list is exclusively aimed at AVT translators, in Spanish or any other language. It is a very dynamic and active group, in which the participants help each other by contributing possible translation solutions and by discussing issues of common interest, such as translation fees, the search for new clients or the existence of interesting glossaries ([www.xcastro.com/trag](http://www.xcastro.com/trag)).

## **6. Avenues of research**

If we want our area of study to have the academic recognition it deserves, we need the publication of less anecdotal and more substantial works. We need to expand our research horizons. Lefevere establishes himself as one of the most fervent champions in favour of a more broadminded approach to research in translation:

Much of what we are saying has been said already, albeit in a different kind of jargon. This should not deter us, however. Looking back at the long tradition of thinking on translation in Western Europe, we realize the relatively recent attempts to limit discussions of translation to what pertains to constraints of language only, signally fail to do justice to the complexity of the problem (1992:xiv).

His proposal defends the study of translation as a cultural and not simply a linguistic phenomenon. Areas such as the power struggle between different participants, the conscious manipulation of a target text, the post-colonial and gender – both gay and feminist – perspectives, are fields of research that have already been dealt with in the translation of literature and poetry, but have yet to make their entrance into the audiovisual world.

Theoretical frameworks such as the one known as Descriptive Translation Studies are an ideal platform from which one can launch oneself into this adventure. The writings of authors such as Holmes, Even-Zohar, Toury, Hermans and Lefevere, amongst others, contain the principles by which this line of thought is articulated. For the

translation scholar, concepts such as *norms*, *polysystem* and *patronage* are a heuristic tool that opens up new avenues of study, gives strength to the theoretical model of analysis and allows us to work with a certain weight.

When Toury (1985:16) writes that “no empirical science can make a claim for completeness and (relative) autonomy unless it has developed a descriptive branch”, he is in fact proposing an avenue of study that until then had not been exploited sufficiently and since then has proved to be very productive. His theoretical framework is developed in his 1995 book, in which he calls for a discipline with the objectives of “[d]escribing, explaining and predicting phenomena” (1995:1). Such a discipline needs to develop a descriptive branch capable of giving account of the real, not ideal, nature of translations that have been done and consumed.

The descriptive approach is contrary to the more traditional approach of discussing translation on a more abstract and less empirical plane. In Toury’s opinion (1995:1), “what constitutes the subject matter of a proper discipline of Translation Studies is (observable or reconstructable) facts of real life rather than merely speculative entities resulting from preconceived hypotheses and theoretical models”. An opinion shared by other authors such as Lambert (1995:24) who states that “what Descriptive Translation Studies is supposed to offer [is] a panoramic location [...] of translational phenomena. Before trying to understand, to analyze or – especially – to evaluate them we can better *map* them”. The key term here is *map*. A systematic and detailed mapping of what really happens in the world of subtitling is *sine qua non* to be able to investigate both the norms that regulate the profession as well as those which underline the translator’s behaviour. It would be very productive to carry out work, in research groups, that analyses sufficiently broad corpora and allows the derivation of substantial conclusions. An example of this type of research is the TRACE project, a database about translations that were censored in Spain from the Civil War up until 1985 ([trace@vc.ehu.es](mailto:trace@vc.ehu.es)).

To approach dubbing and subtitling from a mere linguistic perspective is clearly insufficient. By transcending the linguistic dimension, the postulates put forward by DTS have the advantage of placing translation scholars in a position that allows them to channel their academic efforts from an interdisciplinary perspective. Translation is viewed as an intercultural rather than interlinguistic communication act, confirming Simon’s statement (1996:134) that “it was only a question of time until cultural studies ‘discovered’ translation”. This discovery has come from authors sitting on the fence between DTS and cultural studies, such as Bassnett and Lefevere (1998). DTS is a

relatively homogeneous and flexible theoretical construct, full of potential for any AVT study. Works carried out in this field by authors such as Ballester Casado (2001), Díaz Cintas (1997), Gutiérrez Lanza (1999), Karamitroglou (2000), Remael (2000) and Sokoli (2000) amongst others, are clear examples.

The linguistic and cultural approaches must not be seen as conflicting paradigms but, rather, complimentary. By focusing on the object of study from many angles we can gain a better understanding of translation and translating. The problem arises when priority is given to one of these dimensions at the exclusion of the other and the solution comes by integrating both approaches. One of the most lucid observations in this respect comes from Harvey (2000:466), who claims that “[t]ranslation is not just about texts: nor is it only about cultures and power. It is about the relation of one to the other”. The analysis of the multiple relations that the translated product establishes with the recipient society can be as interesting and enriching as the linguistic study. Borrowing Harvey’s words (2000:466), what the translation scholar needs is:

[A] methodology that neither prioritizes broad concerns with power, ideology and patronage to the detriment of the need to examine representative examples of text, nor contents itself with detailed text-linguistic analysis while making do with sketchy and generalized notions of context.

Studies that combine the linguistic dimension with feminist, post-colonial, gender or power and culture perspectives are highly profitable from the point of view of the researcher and as yet they have not been dealt with in the world of audiovisual translation.

Another problem that has hindered the study of film translation resides in the subordinate nature that it has been afforded within other academic disciplines. Film encyclopaedias either completely ignore, or make only limited efforts to cover language transfer, despite the irony that this transfer has been occurring ever since the invention of cinema. When a film is analysed through the eyes of a critic from another culture, the emphasis falls mainly on such aspects as editing, plot development, the representation of stereotypes, etc. What on first sight would appear to be complimentary disciplines usually end up disregarding each other in forums of debate. Our research tends to be limited to publications and conferences focussing on translation, and AVT is rarely mentioned at cinema conferences. Closer links between these two disciplines would be desirable and in this respect works such as Chaume (2000, 2003) and Remael (2000) are most welcome.

Approaches to translation which have made a large impact on areas such as literary translation, are still yet to be applied to subtitling. Pragmatics and discourse analysis have afforded us concepts full of potential such as theme, rheme, coherence, cohesion, field, tenor, etc. Studies on politeness that take the linguistic dimension into account as much as the image are currently lacking. Other areas that could motivate future researchers are:

- 1) 1) The compilation of corpora based on films or other audiovisual programmes.
- 2) 2) The analysis of the subtitling of one same programme into two different target languages, for example the subtitling of a Spanish film into French and German.
- 3) 3) The analysis of Spanish subtitles for programmes originally made in languages other than English, to see whether or not they follow the same conventions as when subtitling from all-powerful English.
- 4) 4) Comparative studies of subtitling at various levels (corporative, regional, national, international) with the objective of establishing a set of guidelines for what could be a code of good subtitling practice.
- 5) 5) Studies on the reception of subtitles to establish the appropriate reading speed, the easiest conventions, etc.
- 6) 6) A historiography of subtitling.
- 7) 7) Comparative studies from a diachronic perspective to see how subtitling was done in the past, and how it is done nowadays.
- 8) 8) Contrastive analysis of the subtitling of a film or programme for different media, such as television, cinema, video or DVD.
- 9) 9) Comparison between the subtitling of films and the subtitling of other audiovisual genres such as documentaries or TV series.
- 10) 10) Studies on the teaching and learning of subtitling.
- 11) 11) Pragmatic and linguistic analyses of areas posing difficulty to the subtitler, such as taboo expressions and linguistic variation.
- 12) 12) Studies on the subtitling of children's programmes.
- 13) 13) Corruption of the Spanish language by the infiltration of English through subtitled programmes.
- 14) 14) Subtitling for the deaf and hard-of-hearing, from intralingual (Spanish-Spanish) as well as from interlingual (English-Spanish) perspectives.

These points cover just a few ideas for topics that could be researched in the field of subtitling. The possibilities of study are many and varied. Research into AVT is fashionable and seems to

have a very promising future. But we must not let ourselves be blinded by the good signs. There are many challenges at various levels – educational, academic, professional, social, cultural etc. – of which we must be aware.

## **7. Challenges in research**

The tension between theoretical and applied approaches is a constant in the relationship between university and industry. It is a situation that arises not only in the case of translation, but is also encountered in other fields of learning. In my opinion, the solution lies in a symbiosis that accommodates theory, practise and teaching. It is of little benefit to us or our society to shut ourselves away in an ivory tower and draw up theories with no empirical base, to produce a practical work that has no theoretical base, or to teach processes that have nothing to do with the reality of the workplace and have no solid theory behind them. To gain visibility and to assure the social welfare of translation, we need to join forces and avoid the creation of an unnecessary schism between the three dimensions, each as indispensable as the others.

It would be advantageous for research into subtitling to be at the heart of the interdiscipline of translation, capable of reconciling the linguistic and cultural paradigms. However, “the construction of an interdisciplinary methodology is not straightforward, since few researchers possess the necessary expertise in a wide range of subject areas” (Munday 2001:189). At present, a large number of AVT scholars are young, requiring time and maturity to expand their cultural knowledge. With these two ingredients it is very likely that their efforts will crystallise into works of great importance in the not too distant future.

There is no doubt that AVT is in fashion among students and researchers. However, what seems to be an unequivocal sign of good health could also give rise to some disadvantages. On an employment level, it runs the risk of saturating the market, forcing a fall in the fees charged. On a research level, the term *audiovisual* is sometimes added with certain flippancy to pieces of work to make them more attractive, when in reality what is presented is very limited in its audiovisual specificity and could well be applied to other areas of translation. Furthermore, the excessive publications that focus on the same topics could also have a pernicious effect in the long run. Too many contributions with little substance will not be of any great benefit to AVT. What we need are works that open up new avenues and touch upon hitherto unexplored topics.

One of the most commonly recurring complaints in AVT has been directed at the lack of interest shown by many academics towards our field. In some cases it has led to the discipline of translation being branded as elitist for being only interested in major works. In AVT, we run the same risk. Most studies into subtitling concentrate on films, forgetting a myriad of other audiovisual programmes that are considered inferior, such as documentaries, cartoons or series. This biased attitude has filtered through into the terminology that we have come to use. Curiously, much has been said about cinematographic translation, when films for the cinema are precisely the most difficult to analyse because of their format and the conditions in which they are projected. In fact, the majority of studies are carried out with films recorded from television, distributed in VHS, or, more recently, on DVD.

Most of the films analysed tend to be rather similar. They are highly considered socially, are aimed at a particular audience and have been directed by acclaimed filmmakers. This attitude can be blamed to some extent on insecurity, or an inferiority complex, on the part of the researchers themselves. We believe that our area of study is marginal, and we try to rectify this by resorting to prestigious, highly respected cineastes and programmes. We are only managing to map out a very partial and limited reality of subtitling that cannot hope to be representative of the world of subtitling. To complete the task of achieving a global view, it is necessary to broaden our horizons and study the subtitling of other programmes that enjoy lesser cultural prestige.

When carrying out our analyses, we must do all we can to avoid decontextualising the examples under scrutiny. In many cases, the virtues and flaws of the translation only take into account the linguistic dimension. We cannot forget that we are working with products with audio and visual dimensions, and both must be taken into account if we want to be fair when evaluating the final result. What is said, but also how it is said are both important.

If we are aware of these challenges and know how to tackle them, there is no doubt that the future of AVT in general and that of subtitling in particular is very bright.

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