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ON AUDIOVISUAL TRANSLATION: DUBBING

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Abstract: *The present article focuses on dubbing understood as a creative process of “adapting” the source language script/verbalized message/soundtrack to the target language script/verbalized message/soundtrack, challenging principles such as fidelity versus freedom in translation, bringing once again to our attention the much debated ‘reality’ pinpointed by the Italian adage “traduttore traditore”, yet not from the point of view of untranslatability, but from that of the need for “transadaptation” in the interlingual transfer required by the audiovisual industry.*

Keywords: *audiovisual translation, dubbing, fidelity, BTI Studios*

1. Introduction

In discussing audiovisual translation, there are various more-or-less-flexible classifications of the language transfer modes one can take into consideration (see Nicolae 2015:355). However, in the present article we make use of the one that relates to the main methods: subtitling and revoicing, the latter including the sub-categories of dubbing (or ‘lip-sync’), and voiceover (or ‘half-dubbing’).

Dubbing implies that the oral output stays oral output and does not change into a written one. On that note, we mention the two approaches Diaz Cintas and Orero (2010:441) refer to in relation to the language transfer in the audiovisual industry:

1. oral output remains oral output (revoicing) → 2 major revoicing practices (dubbing and voiceover)

- the (new) TL soundtrack may actually replace the SL/original soundtrack; the target viewer can no longer hear the original soundtrack (dubbing/‘lip sync’ and narration);
- the translation is overlapped; the original spoken dialogue is still audible in the background (voiceover and interpreting).

2. oral output is transformed into written output (subtitling)

Dubbing is, therefore, understood as a creative process of adapting the source language text/script/verbalized message to the target language script/soundtrack, where ‘adapting’ implies the substitution of the SL soundtrack with a TL equivalent, challenging principles such as fidelity versus freedom in translation, bringing once again to our attention the much debated ‘reality’ pinpointed by the Italian adage “traduttore traditore”, yet not from the point of view of untranslatability, but from that of the need for transadaptation in the interlingual transfer.

As a complex process, dubbing relies on the semiotic cohesion given by the synchronization of the translated script, the soundtrack, and the lip movements of the speakers/characters on the screen; at the same time it implies localising the SL text into another language (TL). On the audiovisual market, dubbing is known to be more expensive and more time-consuming than subtitling (the other AVT mode that is on demand on the market), relying

on the work of more professionals (translators, adapters/dubbing directors, actors, sound technicians).

In the field of AVT, dubbing is regarded as more labour-intensive and more costly than subtitling. However, one of the advantages of dubbing is that it leaves the semiotic structure of the film intact, because there is no extra layer added onto the image, as in subtitling, where written information activates a third reception mode. (Filimon 2017:147)

As Eliza Filimon emphasizes, there being “no extra layer added onto the image” (i.e. subtitles – written text activating a third reception mode), it is easier for the audience (especially little children, illiterate audience, etc.) to follow the video material and to understand the message. Yet, despite facilitating the reception of the message, dubbing has been argued against as a mode of audiovisual translation that would hinder second language acquisition, the viewers being exposed only to TL soundtrack, therefore not offering the linguistic educational advantages that subtitling does.

2. Which Are Then the Challenges In Dubbing As An AVT Mode? Which Are Those In Subtitling?

Subtitling (see Nicolae) has to take into account spatiotemporal constraints (e.g. up to 42 characters per line, 2 lines maximum; reading speed: 21 characters/second), the change of mode from oral to written, semiotic cohesion given by the synchrony of subtitles + image + sound. As to fitting the SL message/text into the spatial and temporal requirements, the professionals often have to resort to undertranslation, partial/total text reduction - omissions of lexical items from the original, reformulation at word and sentence level, text compression/condensation, etc. Dubbing, on the other hand, is primarily conditioned by the substitution of SL soundtrack with the TL soundtrack while its semiotic cohesion is given by the synchrony between the dubbed soundtrack and images, as previously mentioned.

As processes of translation, both subtitling and dubbing imply cultural and linguistic competence, i.e. command of TL and SL cultural background and linguistic structures (lexis, grammar, register, culture-bound structures, etc.), all these combined with the technical knowledge required by the audiovisual modes and reflecting the hybrid nature of AVT (i.e. transadaptation).

Analysed from a different perspective, the SL text and the TL text coexist on the screen in subtitling, meaning that they are available at the same time. The viewers can thus compare both messages, which triggers the “vulnerability” of subtitling seen as an overt type of translation. It is in this context that we need to mention the ‘feedback effect’ from the original, which implies that not transferring from ST to TT lexical items which are audible in the soundtrack may lead to the viewers’ criticism and to their speculation as to whether the subtitles are incorrect and the translator is not as competent as (s)he should be. Contrastively, since dubbing is “synchronous reproduction of the matching of verbal and nonverbal languages” (Pavesi in Miola & Ramat 145), it also implies the fact that the viewers do not hear the original soundtrack, hence the translation act is hidden and the viewer cannot spot the flouting of the principle of fidelity in translation (if any).

Therefore, the dichotomy ‘fidelity versus treason’ is one of the challenges taken into consideration when discussing the process of dubbing, being perceived as one of the most controversial aspects of the process of translation (be it written and/or oral). In the case of dubbing, the viewers cannot state whether there are losses and/or gains acquired in the dubbed version or whether all lexical items from the original have been transferred to the dubbed version and the message has not been altered in any way.

In the second chapter of her book, *On Translation: Communication, Controversy, Cultural Globalisation*, Han Bianca analyses the dichotomy ‘fidelity versus treason’ and states at

one point that there is a kind of metamorphosis that takes place at the level of the text when the act of translation is performed:

Once a translation of a certain text is being performed, there is a special kind of metamorphosis going on at the text level. The original text undergoes a real process of transformation, interpretation, adaptation, etc. in order to become a new one, ready for its new audience. Such operations lead us to thinking that there is lots to lose, just as much as there is to gain out of these processes that aim to become the new project, that of the translator's. (Han 2011:99)

Indeed, metamorphosis takes place in linguistic transfers. Possibly to quite a large extent in the case of dubbing, which (as a process) includes the passing on of the rough translation to the dubbing director/adaptor. It is here that fidelity 'meets' synchrony (audio and visual cues) or, as Diaz Cintas and Pilar put it:

Given that the original soundtrack has been erased and viewers do not usually have the possibility of comparing original and translation, the professionals involved in dubbing do not need to be as literal as in subtitling and have in principle more latitude to play with the content and form of the dialogues" (our emphasis). (2011:444)

It is then fundamental that we refer to the three types of synchrony that characterize the process of dubbing (see also Fodor qtd in Diaz Cintas and Orero; Bosseaux in Luis Perez-Gonzales) and offer clearer guidelines in understanding why fidelity needs to be approached from a different perspective when it comes to this audiovisual mode:

- *phonetic synchrony/lip sync(hrony)* → focus on syllables and letters; "adapting the translation to the articulatory movements of the on-screen characters, especially in close-ups and extreme close-ups" (Chaume qtd in Bosseaux), meaning that the translated dialogue has to appear to be visually identical to the original;

- *synchrony of the translation with the actors' movements and gestures/ character synchrony* (Fodor qtd in Gambier & van Doorslaer 443)/ *kinetic synchrony* (Whitman-Linsen, idem) → the translation goes hand in hand with the actors' movements and does not contradict the image;

- *isochrony* → "making sure that the duration of the translated exchanges is in tune with the duration of the original ones and the utterances can be comfortably fitted between the moments the actors open and shut their mouth" (Diaz Cintas and Orero 443).

In order to exemplify the issue of fidelity in dubbing, we have decided to add a short practical approach which consists of a brief analysis of some instances from the original English script and the dubbed Romanian version of the first episode of the movie "Merlin" (TV Mini-Series 1998). The analysis takes into account grammar and lexis, regardless of takes (the translation units in dubbing) – which we have no knowledge of as to the number and division of takes established for this movie by the dubbing team.

English original script ST	Romanian dubbed version TT
https://www.springfieldspringfield.co.uk/movie_script.php?movie=merlin	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v1wUj4ok66U
Once upon a time... No, no , that's not the way to start. You'll think this isa fairy tale, and it isn't.	A fost odată... Nu, nu așa trebuie să-ncep. Ați putea crede că e un basm cu zâne și nu e.
It has elements of a fairy tale -- Dragons, elves, griffins, fairies and so on- And it has magic.	Are unele elemente, cum ar fi dragonii, spiriduși, grifoni și altele. Chiar și magie.

<p>Now, in my day, magic was much more commonplace. Oh, well, all things change. The arrow of time points in one direction only. So... Where should I begin? [...] Well, it's obvious I should start at the beginning... <i>Loose your arrows!</i> ...With the terrible years of darkness.</p>	<p>Deși, pe vremea mea, magia era ceva obișnuit. Dar totul s-a schimbat. Săgeata timpului zboară într-o singură direcție. Deci, de unde să-ncep? [...] Evident, de la-nceput. Cu acei... <i>Trageți săgețile!</i> ... Cu acei groaznici ani ai întinericului.</p>
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The three negatives in the second line of the original script (repetition of “no” as a means of emphasis, and “not”) have been reduced to two in the dubbed version; the ST has eight syllables, whereas the TT has nine. Preserving all three negatives would have added another syllable and it would have affected isochrony and phonetic synchrony.

The verbal tense used in the third line (ST) is future simple/future indicative (“I’ll think”), while the TT equivalent shifts to the use of modality (“ați putea crede” = “you might believe/think”), which seems more natural in TL and more appropriate to the register required by the times the movie makes reference to.

The fourth TT line is an example of omission, addition, and substitution. The structure “of a fairy tale” has been felt as redundant in the TL since it would have led to the repetition of “basm cu zâne”, plus it would have added unnecessary syllables to TT, therefore it has been omitted together with the word “fairies” in the fifth line. The TT shows the addition of the indefinite determiner “unele” in “unele elemente” (“some elements”) and of the structure “cum ar fi” (“such as”), the latter softening the transition to the enumeration that follows while the former replaces, in fact, “of a fairy tale”.

The sixth line “And it has magic” has been rendered as “Chiar și magie”, the conjunction “and” and the pronoun “it” being replaced by “chiar și”, which would have had the English “(and) even” as a word-for-word equivalent. The Romanian dubbed version avoids the redundant repetition of the verb *to have*, which makes it sound more natural.

The transitional particle “now” has not been translated but replaced with “deși”, which is the Romanian equivalent for “although”, and the comparative structure “much more (commonplace)” with the indefinite pronoun “ceva (obișnuit)”, but the minor changes in meaning do not affect the overall message.

The SL “Oh, well, all things change” becomes the TL “Dar totul s-a schimbat”; the Romanian version is introduced by the adversative (coordinating) conjunction “but” and makes use of a past indicative, whereas the original is introduced by “oh, well”, “oh” functioning here as a sentence connector which introduces a remark (together with the interjection “well”), and the sentence makes use of a present indicative. The translator has opted for a shift from a general present-tense statement to a past-tense, more event-oriented statement, flouting the principle of fidelity to a greater extent, but preserving the idea of change.

In the following line, the verb “points” has not been translated as “arată”, but substituted by “zboară” (“flies”), which seems to have a more dramatic impact/connotation.

The Romanian version for “Well, it’s obvious I should start at the beginning...” is rendered as “Evident, de la-nceput” in response to “Deci, de unde să-ncep?”. The dubbed answer includes only the equivalent for “obvious” and “at the beginning”, the rest of the sentence being considered redundant, thus omitted without any subsequent change of meaning. The next line

represents an addition to the original - “Cu acei...” precedes the side comment “Trageți săgețile!” and is repeated after it, the repetition softening the transition and adding a dramatic tone.

All in all, the examples above emphasise once again the fact that, to a varying extent, the process of linguistic transfer (be it oral or written) triggers losses and gains either at word level or sentence level, dubbing being no exception to the rule, if we might say so.

3. Dubbing and the Romanian Audiovisual Market

If we consider dubbing on the Romanian market, we have noticed that the ‘offer’ is not so generous, our online search resulting in just several findings: Fast Production Films, SDI Media, Shortcut Media, BTI Studios Oradea and Bucharest. We shall refer to BTI Studios in more detail for reasons that will become clear in the paragraphs to follow.

BTI Studios is one of the largest media localization companies in the world, with 21 local offices providing dubbing and subtitling services in 48 working languages, 80+ language combinations (as listed on their site <http://www.btistudios.com/about-bti-studios.html>), multilingual video description, access services to independent producers and filmmakers, broadcasters (BBC Worldwide, Discovery Networks and Turner), film studios (NBC Universal, Warner, Disney), VoD Platforms (Netflix, Amazon, Hulu). The company has two local offices in Romania: one in Bucharest and one in Oradea. The former has been on the Romanian subtitling market for 17 years, working with TV channels such as Paramount, Discovery, Animal Planet, BBC Entertainment, BBC Knowledge. The latter, managed by Sandor Barany, is the first dubbing studio in Romania and has been on the Romanian dubbing market since 1999, with clients such as Jim Jam, Megamax, Turner, Minimax and Warner Bros.

It is in this context that we see as worth mentioning our own experience with BTI Studios Oradea. Together with five students from “Petru Maior” University of Târgu Mureș (now UMFST), and a group of students and their coordinators (Eliza Filimon, Luminița Frențiu, Andreea Șerban) from University of the West, Timișoara, we were given the opportunity to pay a research visit to BTI Studios Oradea, in order to familiarize the selected students with the challenges of audiovisual translation, more specifically the challenges that the process of dubbing is generally associated with, the opportunities and the (market) requirements for the ones interested in this field of activity.

Since the study programme in which the students (Trîmbițaș Andreea, Diana Cioloca, Floricica Nagy, Gabriela Pinte, Oana Mărginean) were specializing was AML (Applied Modern Languages - undergraduate programme), with a focus on translation and interpreting, the research visit proved horizon-broadening, offering the students not only the opportunity to see professionals at work, but also necessary ‘tools’ in the understanding of the stages of dubbing and the importance of technology in translators’ work.

This research visit was structured into a theoretical part and a practical one. The former included a presentation of the process of dubbing and of the dubbing studio in Oradea, followed by a question-and-answer session, a dialogue between Mr. Sandor Barany and our students. The latter part, the practical one, gave the students the possibility to interact with the professionals, to experience first-hand the process of dubbing and its stages, to see and analyse the strategies they need to resort to in order to render a coherent and cohesive dubbed version; in the end, some of the students were given the opportunity to practice dubbing themselves and understand its complexity.

Below we have included a selection of the questions the students involved in this project have prepared/formulated:

1. What exactly made you choose audiovisual translation? Why dubbing and not subtitling? Better yet, why more dubbing and less subtitling?
2. Which are the stages of dubbing as met in practice, not only theoretically?

3. Which are the challenges, the limitations, the most difficult aspects of the process of dubbing?
4. If we consider the Italian expression “traduttore, traditore”, how much freedom is there for the ‘translator’ who works in the field of AVT (in your case, dubbing) as compared to the translator who deals with ‘traditional’ translation (literary/specialized translations), interpreting and even subtitling? To what extent can (s)he deviate from the source text (ST), thus more or less flouting the principle of fidelity?
5. Who monitors the entire process? Which are the subsequent responsibilities?
6. Are there official “guidelines” out on the European/American market, rules that you need to take into consideration? If yes, are these rules followed on our market?
7. When we talk about audiovisual translation, we refer to subtitling, dubbing, voice-over. Out of these, which one reflects the Romanian market demand? Which do you consider the most/least challenging and why?
8. Which are the hiring requirements? What do the potential employees need to be skilled at? One aspect young graduates need to face upon looking for a job is the work experience in the field, required by the employer. To what extent does this apply to a dubbing company?
9. How profitable is it to work in this field of activity? Is dubbing more profitable on the Romanian market than subtitling and/or voice-over?

Taking everything into account, this opportunity of meeting professionals at work helped the students to understand the complexity of the process of dubbing, the workflow it implies, the challenges and the limitations of this kind of transadaptation.

4. Conclusion

Although it might not follow the principle of fidelity in translation, but flout it to a certain extent, and even if it has been labelled educationally counter-productive in second language acquisition, dubbing remains a complex, creative process that helps certain segments of audience overcome the linguistic barriers they face whenever there is a language transfer where both SL and TL are available to them (for example, subtitling), when they deal with the act of reading the subtitles, or when they are exposed to SL audio track alone.

“The visit to BTI Studios Oradea was an extraordinary experience. I had the opportunity to discover the world of dubbing, to get an insight into this amazing world. I am sure this will prove useful in the future, not only on a professional level if I have the chance to work in the field, but also on a personal level, as I have always been curious to know who's hiding behind those beloved characters in cartoons. I also had the opportunity to meet wonderful people who gladly offered to share what they knew about dubbing and also showed us the work they had to perform. They even encouraged us to try ourselves and ‘work’ in the studio. To sum up, I am delighted that I had such an experience and I would do it again anytime as I was very impressed by the place, the people in the studio and also their work. Dubbing is not an easy task, but they have turned it into passion and thus it becomes much more attractive.” (Andreea TRÎMBIȚAȘ, AML III)

“For me, the visit to BTI Studios Oradea represented the fulfilment of a childhood dream. I have always wanted to learn more about what really happens behind the voices of my favourite cartoon characters.

During this visit we learned from some wonderful people who were eager to show us some of their workplace secrets, the fact that dubbing, as a complex process, involves a lot of

stages and also the use of various and extremely creative instruments in order to give the final product that special glow.

This visit was very useful for me because it showed me another fascinating side of translation; we have also been given advice from professionals in the field and even if dubbing is not an easy job, I would be glad, as a potential future translator, to have the opportunity to work in such a studio.” (Diana CIOLOCA, AML III)

“The visit to BTI Studios Oradea represented a great experience. I was very happy to have this opportunity. Everyone welcomed us openly and they shared with us some secrets of their day-to-day activity. I was very surprised when I recognized a voice from my favourite cartoons I used to watch as a child.

Also, this experience was very useful for me, as a future translator. I had the chance to interact with a possible work environment. And even if I could work from home as a translator, it was very interesting to get the overall picture and see where ‘magic’ happens.” (Florica Nagy, AML graduate)

“I remember all the cartoons that I watched as a child. Many a times, it happened to me to recognise the voices of my favourite animated characters, and the names of the ones who dubbed - uttered at the end of each cartoon - remained stuck in my head over the years.

Our visit to BTI Studios Oradea really impressed me. The atmosphere was, of course, as we expected: warm, friendly, enjoyable. Everyone was very kind to us and willing to share various aspects of what they did to entertain the children and not only. For me, as a potential future translator, I can say that this visit really opened my eyes because I discovered how many beautiful things are hidden behind this job. That’s why I can say that by visiting BTI Studios Oradea, I’ve found a new possible wish for the future: to be part of this beautiful team. Due to this new experience of seeing something else than the usual daily activities that surround us, I came to the conclusion that what BTI Studios do is not as easy as it seems, but I realized that where there’s passion and hard work, only wonderful things can come out.” (Gabriela PINTEA, LMA III)

“For me the visit at BTI Studios Oradea was a great experience from which I was able to better understand all the stages of this process and all the efforts they make in a dubbing studio. We really enjoyed every moment spent there, we explored every room and some of us even tried practising dubbing. I was excited to hear again the representative voices which marked my childhood and I was very impressed with all the work they do as a team.

At BTI Studios Oradea I got to meet so many amazing people, true professionals who are doing a remarkable work. I truly consider that for me as a future translator, this whole experience was extremely useful. I will definitely take into account all the words of advice we got and I will try to apply them in the future if given the opportunity.” (Oana MĂRGINEAN, MLA graduate)

Abbreviations

AVT – audiovisual translation

SL, TL – source language, target language

ST, TT – source text, target text

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