# *PROS AND CONS OF SUBTITLING AND DUBBING OF AUDIOVISUAL TEXTS IN CHILDREN'S PROGRAMMES AND CARTOONS*

**Violeta Tănase, PhD student, „Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iaşi**

*Abstract: The never-ending dispute regarding subtitling versus dubbing of audiovisual texts has produced countless arguments in favour and against these two ways of handling audiovisual material. Regardless of the advantages and disadvantages of both dubbing and subtitling, there are some segments of AVT - children's programmes, animation movies, cartoons and teen soap operas- where scholars and translators should focus less on issues such as costs or conservation of national identities and more on the need to enhance the production of high-quality target texts. This study aims at analyzing a few aspects related to the dubbing and subtitling of audiovisual products intended primarily for children, evaluating the quality of some of these products. Examples are extracted from the animation movie, "The Reluctant Dragon" and the teen soap "Hannah Montana". The corpus analysis will point out a series of significant differences between the subtitled and dubbed versions of the audiovisual text, signalling instances where the translator's choices seem unacceptable and proposing alternative versions. Another aim of this study is to raise awareness about the educational value of subtitling and the negative impact poor quality translation of audiovisual products might have upon children's education.*

*Keywords: audiovisual texts, subtitling, dubbing, children's programmes, cartoons*

## Introduction

Translating for the screen is, in many ways, completely different from translating a printed text. In audiovisual translation the translator is faced with a polysemiotic text that has a triadic structure (image / word / sound). The screen product is made up of several interacting codes. The visual code (which is, in turn, made up of actors' movements, facial expressions, gestures, scenery, costumes, lightning and colour, verbal information such as signposts, banners, street signs, letters, etc.) supports the acoustic code. The latter consists primarily of dialogue lines, but the non-verbal sounds, such as background noises, sound effects and music are equally important. The enumeration of all these elements that are part of the screen product is meant to point out the incredibly complicated task of the screen translator, who has to take into account all these aspects of the text and especially the way they interact in order to produce a certain perlocutionary effect. This means that the translated target text should not only have the same meaning as the source text, but it should produce upon the target audience the same effect the source text produces upon the source audience.

There are several types of multilingual transfer in the field of audiovisual communication. Gambier (2008), for instance distinguishes between interlingual subtitling, bilingual subtitling, intralingual subtitling for the hard of hearing, dubbing, voice-over, surtitling and audio



BDD-A22389 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 00:14:33 UTC)

description for the visually impaired. This paper aims at analysing two main ways of dealing with the audiovisual text as far as translation is concerned: subtitling and dubbing. The audiovisual text type under analysis is intended for and impacts upon a very special and vulnerable audience, namely children and teenagers.

Children nowadays are practically surrounded by screens, every single day. They are, at the same time, the most innocent and greedy consumers of AVT. The quality and accuracy of the target audiovisual products they are constantly exposed to has a huge impact on their acquisition and consolidation of both foreign languages and their mother tongue.

Romania is one of the 'subtitling nations', meaning that subtitling is generally preferred in screen translation, chiefly because its cost-effectiveness. As a result, target viewers benefit from all the advantages of being exposed to the original dialogue and soundtrack when watching a foreign production, be it a motion picture, a documentary, a cookery show or a talk show. It is usually believed and accepted, even in the countries with a firm bias on subtitling, that the most appropriate approach of an audiovisual product intended for the very young or the very old segments of the audience is dubbing. This is why most cartoons, children shows, animation films and teen soaps are now dubbed.

**Subtitling: benefits and ill effects**

Subtitling can be defined as "the rendering in a different language of verbal messages in filmic media, in the shape of one or more lines of written text presented on the screen in sync with the original verbal message" (Gottlieb, cited in Delia Chiaro, 2009, p. 148). The subtitles or captions are transcription of dialogues or monologues in films or television programmes, consisting usually of one or two lines of an average maximum of 35 Roman characters. Captions are placed at the bottom of the screen, either centred or left-aligned and last for about 6 seconds.

Due to its 'technicality', subtitling faces the translator with numerous challenges, as it is governed by space and time constraints. The subtitler has to incorporate on the screen a written text that is in fact a condensed version of the source dialogue and is supposed to produce upon the target viewer the same effect that the original dialogue has on the source audience. The translator's efforts are backed up by the viewer's exposure to the original dialogue and soundtrack. Most of the elements that tend to be omitted or even lost (simply because the subtitled text should be shorter than the audio) are compensated by the fact that the target audience has permanent access to the original acoustic element. It has been estimated that original dialogues are reduced by between 40 and 75 percent in order to give the audience the chance of watching a movie effortlessly, that is reading the subtitles without losing track of what actually happens on the screen and without realizing that they make a conscious effort to follow the captions. The subtitler has a whole range of techniques to choose from in order to make sure the 'skopos' is successfully achieved. Elimination of any information that does not alter the meaning of the original dialogue (like false starters, hesitations, repetitions, redundancies) or that can be understood from the visuals, the cutting off or simplification of features such as slang, dialect or taboo language, the simplification and compensation of the original syntax, are just some of the techniques used by subtitlers in order to promote comfortable reading of the captions. The viewer is equally challenged by the audio-medial text. The extratextual elements (images, soundtrack, noises, canned laughter) may add to the meaning of captions, but can equally divert the viewers. The subtitled text is a dynamic type of text, a text that literally moves on the screen. Apart from the 5 or 6 seconds allowed for each caption, the viewer has no second



BDD-A22389 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 00:14:33 UTC)

chance to come back to the text in case he/she misunderstood or failed to understand something. Frustration may build up especially with the slower readers. Being a slower reader is not necessarily a sign of illiteracy; it may, as well, be related to age. Subtitling is unanimously considered less appropriate for the very young members of the target audience, since it involves extra effort and it is strictly related to the speed of reading.

**Dubbing: pros and cons**

Dubbing is the process that entails "the replacement of the original speech by a voice track which attempts to follow as closely as possible the timing, phrasing and lip-movements of the original dialogue" (Luyken cited in Delia Chiaro, 2009, p. 148). Jorge Diaz Cintas (2003, p.195) notes even more specifically that "dubbing involves replacing the original soundtrack containing the actors' dialogue with a target language (TL) recording that reproduces the original message, while at the same time ensuring that the TL sounds and the actors' lip movements are more or less synchronised".

Like subtitling, the process of dubbing is governed by a series of constraints. While in the case of subtitling the main difficulty resides in making the transition from the oral to the written code, in dubbing the codes are of an identical nature: spoken SL dialogue is supposed to be transferred into spoken TL dialogue, provided that authenticity is preserved. Dubbers have to make the target dialogue sound as if it were uttered by the original actors and try to avoid that feeling of 'unnaturalness' the target audience might experience, especially when it comes to close-ups and lip-sync. Dubbing is by far more labour intensive than subtitling; it involves more people and the end product depends on several human factors, with sometimes very different perspectives. The script is first translated, then adapted to sound natural in the target language and to fit, then recorded by actors and eventually mixed with the original recording. Consequently, dubbing is more expensive and more time consuming than subtitling. Its most striking disadvantage is probably the loss of authenticity: the original voices are replaced, extra-textual elements make it often impossible to maintain the illusion of authenticity, and lip synchronisation is often very difficult to attain. The viewers are deprived of the possibility of listening to the foreign language and fully enjoying the presence on the screen of a famous actor. The voice does not only mirror the actor's personality, but it is also a key element in the source audience's way of perceiving a certain character.

On the other hand, it is generally believed that dubbing involves less textual reduction than subtitling and consequently less volume of dialogue is lost. The discourse is homogenous and the viewer is not distracted by the constant effort of following the captions. This is probably the main reason for which children's programmes, animated series and cartoons are rather dubbed than subtitled, even in countries like Romania, where subtitling is generally favoured.

This aspect brings us back to the aim of this paper, namely to make some considerations about the importance, use and benefits of subtitling versus dubbing when it comes to children's programmes and cartoons. Moreover, some observations will be made with regard to the harmful effect poor quality translation can have upon the children's reception of audiovisual material and upon their education in terms of foreign language and vocabulary acquisition. The educational value of subtitling should not be underestimated. It is true that kids can fully and effortlessly enjoy a dubbed cartoon or animated series. They are more attracted to the image and action than to the dialogue. Nevertheless, dubbing deprives them of the exposure to the foreign language (English, in most cases), which is essential for vocabulary acquisition. In this respect, it might be



BDD-A22389 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 00:14:33 UTC)

worth noting that baby animated series do not actually need any translation at all (subtitling is out of the question anyways) and can just be used for language learning purposes. One or two-year olds get both the intended entertainment and learn simple vocabulary (*hello*, *bye*, *butterfly*, *big*, *small*, *yellow*, etc.) by associating the image with the sound.

The companies selling audiovisual programmes and their producers are actually the ones deciding if a certain movie or programme sells or is better received either dubbed or subtitled. The DVD technology nowadays actually allows for a multitude of choices. A movie, for instance, can be watched with either intralingual or interlingual subtitles. Even if they are primarily meant for the hearing impaired, intralingual subtitles can be of great help for a target viewer who has a certain command of the foreign language and wants to improve his/her reading and listening-comprehension skills. They also provide great research material when compared with subtitles in the target language.

**Subtitling and dubbing of children's programmes and cartoons**

**Animation movies** are quite successful and sell well. As they can now be seen in cinema in both the dubbed and subtitled versions, they appeal to all categories of target viewers, regardless of age, language proficiency or preference for either translation mode. The cinema industry seems to be treating its customers quite respectfully, at least as far as animated films are concerned. New releases of Disney or Pixar animation films are so exquisitely made these days that they are enjoyed by children and adults alike. They have brilliant scripts, witty dialogues, great humour, plenty of special effects, breath-taking action, award-winning soundtracks, and the characters are voiced by Oscar-nominated actors. High standards of quality in translation are required by producers as part of the international release process. Consequently, the cinema experience is in this case equally successful for both source and target audiences.

Disney classics have wonderfully dubbed versions, in which the characters are voiced by some of the biggest names in Romanian cinematography. A comparative analysis of short fragments of original, subtitled and dubbed dialogues from *The Reluctant Dragon* (*Dragonul Şovăielnic*) (a 1941 American live action and animated film produced by Walt Disney) can illustrate how a good translation can contribute to the long-term success of an animated movie, even for several generations of target viewers.

| Original dialogue | Subtitling | Dubbing |
|---|---|---|
| **The Boy**: Have you had any nice battles lately? | Ai purtat ceva bătălii măreţe în ultima vreme? | Ai avut parte de bătălii frumoase? |
| **The Dragon**: Battles? Oh, no, no, no battles. No. | Nu, nicio bătălie, nici vorbă. | A, nu, bătălii nu. |
| **The Boy**: Oh. Oh, probably too busy scourging the countryside and devouring fair damsels, then. | Probabil că ai fost prea ocupat cu pârjolirea ţinutului nostru şi cu devorarea de cuconiţe drăgălaşe. | Ai fost prea ocupat să năpăstuieşti aşezările şi să devorezi demoazele. |
| **The Dragon**: Scourging? Devouring? Good heavens, no. | Pârjolire, devorare? Doamne fereşte, în niciun caz. | Năpăstuiesc, devorez? Slavă Domnului, nu. |
| **The Boy**: But don't you ever do anything desperate? | Nu faci niciodată gesturi disperate? | Dar tu nu faci nimic disperat? |
| **The Dragon**: Well, yes, I... I | Ba da, eu… Eu compun | Păi da, eu… Eu fac poezii. |



BDD-A22389 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 00:14:33 UTC)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| do make up poetry. | poezii. | |
| **The Boy**: Poetry? | Poezii? | Poezii? |
| **The Dragon**: Verses, you know? Care to hear my latest sonnet? | Da, versuri. Vrei să asculţi ultimul meu sonet? | Versuri, ştii tu… Vrei să auzi ultimul meu sonet? |
| **The Boy**: Well, I... | Păi eu…. | Ăăăă… |
| **The Dragon**: Oh, you'll love this. I call it, "Just A-Drifting". | O să îţi placă foarte mult. L-am intitulat "În derivă". | Îl vei adora. I-am zis "O, ce minune!" |
| **The Dragon**: Just a-drifting o'er the leaves / Like a dewdrop, fancy free, / Playing with the gentle breezes, / Romping with the bumble beezes. / Oh, what fun! Joy never ceases, /Just a-drifting. | Plutesc în derivă printre copaci / Ca o picătură de rouă fără de griji / Mă joc cu vântul stângaci / Şi cu bondarii printre frunze mă zbengui / Ce amuzant! Bucuria nu se mai termină / Iar eu plutesc în derivă. | Ce minune-i să priveşti / Câmpul verde ca-n poveşti / Păsările ciripesc / Şi pe dat' te-nveselesc / O-ho-ho, privind, ai spune / O, ce minune! |

Table 1. Dialogue fragments from *The Reluctant Dragon*

A brief analysis of the subtitled and dubbed versions above reveals a series of significant differences between the two translation modes. In terms of length, surprisingly, the subtitled version seems to be a little longer than the dubbed one, although it is normally believed that dubbing requires less condensation, and there is no need for omissions. Yet, in case of cartoons, the rhythm of speech is not so accelerated, there are many pauses, the action on the screen is often so explicit that the verbal element would be an unnecessary addition to the visual one. Consequently, elements that are normally left aside in subtitling, due to time and space constraints, such as hesitation markers, repetitions or exclamations (*păi eu..., O!, O-ho-ho!*) are this time preserved within the captions. In terms of vocabulary, both the dubber and the subtitler are quite careful in rendering the atmosphere of the story and preserve the humorous effect (*cuconiţe drăgălaşe / demoazele, a pârjoli, a năpăstui*). In the translation of the little 'poem', the subtitler opts for more or less literal translation of the original, while the dubber chooses, quite successfully, to 'create' a little sonnet, with rhythm and rhyme, that fits perfectly into the musical background. The dubbed version is also quite successful in the attempt to create that sense of orality and 'casualness' of the dialogue.

**Animated series** that run on children's television channels, specifically designed for airing cartoons, are currently dubbed in Romania. Besides their entertaining function, cartoons have a huge impact on children as far as education is concerned. The educational value of their content does not make the point of this discussion. However, considering the fact that children are passionate viewers and tend to spend a relevant amount of time watching cartoons, it would not be unfair to say that dubbing prevents them from being exposed to a foreign language at an age when language acquisition is much easier to achieve. Besides, because of the enormous amount of material to be translated, there is undoubtedly time pressure. As with any type of translation, tight deadlines have an impact on quality. Any adult with a certain command of English, who watches an episode of *Scooby Doo*, for instance, can detect cases of mistranslation, calques, unnecessary foreignization, doubled by that sense of 'unnaturalness' which is



BDD-A22389 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 00:14:33 UTC)

unavoidable in dubbing. Moreover, the television channels airing cartoon series employ a limited number of actors, so that several characters end up having similar voices or speaking peculiarities (specific accents, intonation, etc.). If age segments were more carefully considered, it would probably be more beneficial if 8 to 12 year olds had access to subtitled episodes of their favourite animated series, while 2 to 7 year olds could enjoy the dubbed versions of their favourite cartoons.

**Teen soaps** are also dubbed in Romania. In this case, the disadvantages of dubbing versus subtitling are quite clear. Teenagers are quite capable of reading at a reasonably fast pace, and exposure to the original dialogue brings many benefits, consequently subtitling would be the better option. Teen soaps contain numerous culture bound terms which dubbing domesticates often poorly, so that the intercultural element is improperly transferred in the target language. Lip sync is notoriously hard to achieve, and being centred upon teen idols, these productions have plenty of close-ups. The real issue is actually not that the television companies opt for dubbing these productions, but that they are obviously more focussed on volume and variety than on quality. Having no access to the original dialogue and being at an age when they tend to imitate and absorb whatever information they are exposed to, teenagers seem to incorporate in their daily vocabulary all sorts of phrases, formulae, and combinations of words they hear their favourite characters pronounce. Exclamations such as *wow*, *oh*, *yo*, *cool*, *no way*, etc. are already part of the common vocabulary. Young viewers frequently exposed to teen soaps also tend to use excessively some kind of 'dubese' slang (*o, frate* – meaning approximately Oh, *Gosh*, *ce faci, omule?*- literal translation of *what's up, man?*). That is why audio-medial products for teenagers should be treated more carefully as far as the quality of their translation is concerned. The table below provides some examples extracted from a ten-minute fragment of an episode of *Hannah Montana*. Without necessarily being cases of mistranslation, these are examples of dubbed dialogue that sounds unnatural or even lacks meaning. A significant volume of this type of carelessness in translation can even compromise the overall meaning of an episode and confuse the target viewer.

| Dubbed dialogue | Suggested translation solution | Original dialogue |
|---|---|---|
| Eşti un adevărat înger **căzut*** din cer | Eşti un înger venit/coborât din cer | Really, you're an angel from the sky. |
| ***Adăugatul** le face bine bătrânilor. (Le ţine mintea în alertă.) | **Adunările** sunt bune pentru bătrâni / **Matematica** le face bine bătrânilor | Addition is good for old guys. |
| Viaţa mea ***miroase urât**. | Viaţa mea nu mai are sens. | My life stinks. |
| Am un ***flashback**. | Asta îmi aminteşte de ceva. | I have a flashback. |
| Hai ***s-o facem rock**! | Hai s-o facem lată! | Let's rock! |

Table 2. Excerpts of dubbed dialogue from *Hannah Montana* (Season 2, episode 50). * The asterisk signals what we consider an inappropriate translation solution.

In such cases it would be obviously more productive for teenage target viewers to be able to hear the original dialogue while reading the captions. Many teen soap operas are also musicals, and even if the dialogue is dubbed, the original soundtrack is preserved. Dubbing is



BDD-A22389 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 00:14:33 UTC)

again counterproductive in this case, especially when the lyrics of the song are connected to the previous dialogue or the action of the episode.

**Conclusions**

Dubbing is obviously the favourite choice in the translation of children's programmes, cartoons and teen soaps, in spite of its being more time consuming and far more expensive than subtitling. However, dubbing is in many cases exposed to the risk of exaggerated domestication creating thus a feeling of unnaturalness. Animation and cartoons are lip synched. Lip synchronization requires the combined efforts of an entire team made of professional dubbers and talented cast. When localizing animation, if a compromise is made on quality over pricing, the results might be disastrous. Poor dubbing can ruin excellent content. On the other hand, good dubbing of an animation movie can ensure its 'longevity' with several generations of target viewers. As Delia Chiaro (2009) rightfully states, "screen translation is a service. It is only right that consumers of this service receive high-quality products. (…) All the subtitling and dubbing software imaginable cannot replace a good translation".

Although dubbing seems the better solution, at least as far as the very young target viewers are concerned, the benefits of the exposure to the original dialogue as well as of reading captions should not be disregarded when it comes to older children and teenagers. Since English is the most common source language for TV and films, many viewers around the world prefer subtitling in order to learn, practice or improve their English language. Many teenagers could benefit from subtitling as it gives them the ability to develop their language knowledge and skills.

The ongoing argument about whether television programmes or movies should be dubbed or subtitled will probably soon be settled with the help of modern technology. The answer to the question "Dubbing or Subtitling?" will be "Both.", as viewers will be able to choose for themselves their favorite translation mode, due to the development of broadcast and content display technologies. Until the use of these new technologies becomes a reality, it would be useful if the pros and cons of dubbing and subtitling for young target viewers were more carefully considered in terms of the benefits and disadvantages for each specific age-group.

*Acknowledgement: This work was supported by the strategic grant POSDRU/159/1.5/S/133652, co-financed by the European Social Fund within the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007 – 2013.*



BDD-A22389 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 00:14:33 UTC)

**Bibliographic references**


1. **Chiaro, Delia** (1992) *The Language of Jokes: analysing verbal play*. London & New York: Routledge.
2. **Chiaro, Delia** (2009) *Issues in Audiovisual Translation.* In: Munday, Jeremy. (Ed.) The Routledge Companion to Translation Studies. London/New York: Routledge, pp. 141-165
3. **Bassnett, Susan**. (2006) *Translation Studies*, London & New York: Routledge, 3rd edition.
4. **Diaz-Cintas, Jorge and Gunilla Anderman** (2009) *Audiovisual Translation. Language Transfer on Screen.* Palgrave Macmillan
5. **Diaz-Cintas, Jorge.** (2008) *Audiovisual Translation Comes of Age.* In Benjamin Translation Library, Volume 78, Between Text and Image. Updating Research in Screen Translation, Edited by Delia Chiaro, Christine Heiss and Chiara Bucaria
6. **Gambier, Yves.** (2008) *Recent Developments and Challenges in Audiovisual Translation Research*, in Benjamin Translation Library, Volume 78, Between Text and Image. Updating Research in Screen Translation, Edited by Delia Chiaro, Christine Heiss and Chiara Bucaria.
7. **Gottlieb, Henrik**. (1998) *Subtitling*. In: Baker, Mona. (Ed.). Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies. London/New York: Routledge, pp. 244-248.
8. **Snell-Hornby, Mary.** (2002) *The Turns of Translation Studies*, in Benjamin Translation Library, Volume 66


**Audiovisual references**


1. Disney, W. (Producer) (1941). *The Reluctant Dragon*, United States: Walt Disney Productions
2. Poyres M., Correll R., O'Brien B. (Producers) (2007). *Hannah Montana*, United States: Michael Poyres Productions




BDD-A22389 © 2014 "Petru Maior" University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 00:14:33 UTC)