THE CHALLEGING SIDE OF SUBTITLING

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Abstract: *Up to the 1990s, subtitling was not perceived as a translation practice deserving academic attention, being labelled a mere case of adaptation rather than a form of translation. Since then, however, it seems to have gained its well-deserved attention as a result of the transition to a more media-oriented society and the triggered need for audiovisual translation.The present paper focuses on AVT, more precisely on subtitling,from the perspective of the constraints that characterize this language transfer method. The limitations imposed by the medium prove real challenges to the one providing the subtitles, hence (s)he needs to make use of various techniques in order to overcome the aforementioned challenges, this often bringing to the foreground the issue of the vulnerability of subtitling seen as an overt type of translation.*

Keywords*: audiovisual translation, adaptation, subtitling, constraints, language transfer*

The evolution of society and the social choice of globalization have placed greater emphasis on the socio-cultural need for translation, also reflected in the subsequent transition to a more media-oriented society as compared to the traditional press-oriented one. It is in this society framed by the media that audiovisual translation has come to be seen as a fundamental process of communication which, along with other language transfer practices, goes beyond language barriers and brings together people, communities, nations, cultures, thus having an important role in the shaping of cultural, linguistic identities.

Generally speaking, translation is a linguistic and cultural process integrated into the large and complex field of communication; subtitling belongs to the field of audiovisual translation (combining both acoustic and visual parameters/channels) which seems to still have permeable borders when it comes to establishing its categories and which had to make its own way in translation studies.

On referring to the language transfer methods that constitute AVT, Karamitroglou (2000:4) underlines the fact that there is no clear-cut typology scholars have agreed upon and quotes Gambier and Luyken et al to support this view. On the one hand, Gambier gives the following classification: subtitling, simultaneoussubtitling, dubbing, interpreting (pre-recorded and

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consecutive), voice-over, narration, commentary, multilingual broadcast, subtitles and supertitles/supratitles, simultaneous translation. On the other hand, the classification given by Luyken et al distinguishes between subtitling (with its sub-categories: 'traditional' subtitling and simultaneous subtitling) and revoicing (with its sub-categories: lip-sync dubbing, voice-over/narration, and free commentary). In his turn Karamitroglou discusses the previously-mentioned classifications and narrows down the list to subtitling and revoicing, the latter incorporating (lip-sync) dubbing, narration (including voice-over) and free-commentary. There is a further classification of the ways of translating audiovisual programmes, one that relates to the main methods: dubbing (or lip-sync), voice-over and subtitling (Cintas and Remael 8).

Out of all these AVT categories, we have decided to approach subtitling and analyze the translation process as required by this mode. It blends technology and linguistic skills together for the purpose of communication, information and entertainment, while the rendering of the message into the target language is conditioned by some time and space constraints.

"Is it that difficult to create subtitles? Is it not only about mere adaptationof a simplified text to some space and time constraints?" These are the two questions we were most frequently asked whenever we introduced subtitling to students. The tendency of labeling subtitling an inferior type of translation when comparing it to written (literary) translation seems to have always been an issue. Indeed, many argue that not only subtitling, but AVT in general is mere adaptation and not translation properly, enumerating as arguments the parameters that characterize AVT, constraints which distinguish it from literary translation. Therefore the first challenge AVT had to face was its very *status as a translation practice*.

Back in 1995, Ballester stated that "it is a well-known fact that audiovisual translation has always been considered inferior to (written) literary translation, most probably because of the lack of cultural prestige in audiovisual mass-media, compared to canonized literature." (qtd. In Karamitroglou, 2000: 10)

Undeniably, literary translation has always been hailed as the main pillar translation theory was built on. Canonized literature and literary translation impacted the audiovisual mass-media in a more obvious and a stronger way than AVT, and this narrow (even biased) approach to AVT (hence to subtitling) seems not to have entirely disappeared. The difficulty of the text, the volume of work, the time one has to allot to the translation process, the cultural prestige, the spatiotemporal constraints framing AVT, the

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simplification of the text which goes against the well-known principle of fidelity, all these would be just a few of the aspects that are generally brought as arguments when questioning the accommodation of AVT within translation studies. In what regards AVT and the principle of fidelity, we find Bermann and Porter's words quite relevant: "fidelity in the sense of complete correspondence is unattainable, if only because the adapted text is transferred to a different medium" [1]

Yet, no one claims to equal literary translation with AVT, but just like the former, AVT should once and for all be acknowledged as a translation practice whose necessity in the constant effort of building and/or preserving cultural identity in this media-oriented society is beyond any doubt.Although audiovisual translation was granted translation status,academic credibility and recognition in 1990s (this way overcoming the challenge of having an ambiguous status and of accommodating within the field of translation studies), still there are biased voices that question this claim.

Trying to clarify the status of AVT within the field of translation studies, Karamitroglou (2000: 10) enumerates seven constraints which AVT is characterized by and which clearly distinguish it from literary translation, making it be seen as adaptation, without annihilating its claim to translation studies: temporal constraints met in revoicing, spatiotemporal constraints met in subtitling, visual source-culture elements in both revoicing and subtitling, aural SL elements in subtitling, lip-sync in dubbing, inability of backtracking and cross-semiotic nature of subtitling.

All these make it quite clear that AVT implies adaptation, yet it is not limited to it. It is in this context that the replacement of the term 'adaptation' (felt as having taken a negative connotation) with a new generic term became obvious. As a result, a range of umbrella terms were coined: 'film translation', 'screen translation', 'cinema translation', 'multidimensional translation', 'audiovisual translation', with the last one having gained ground and having come to be seen as "the standard referent" (Cintas and Remael 12), a fluctuation in terms which is "no more than a reflection of the changing times in which we live" (ibidem).

Moving on to subtitling, we concentrate our analysis on the interlingual type, also called 'diagonal subtitling', which involves a shift from one language to another and a change from the oral mode to the written one

[1]https://books.google.ro/books?id=HK6sAgAAQBAJ&pg=PT520&dq=challenges+in+subtitling&hl=en&sa=X&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=challenges%20in%20subtitling&f=false

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(Gottlieb qtd in Cintas and Remael 17), offering by its complex nature ground for linguistic consideration.

The coherence and cohesion of film narration relies on the interaction between words, sounds and images, whereas subtitling is built around all the semiotic systems involved in the process reflected/sent through the four categories of communication channels Delabatista (qtd. in Cintas and Remael 46-47) identifies and the sign systems implied:

- visual presentation - verbal signs (e.g. written signs such as magazine or newspaper headlines, street names, shop names etc.)
- visual presentation - non-verbal signs (the photography of the film)
- acoustic presentation - verbal signs (dialogue exchanges, songs)
- acoustic presentation - non-verbal signs (instrumental music, background noises)

In subtitling, semiotic cohesion is the result of the interaction between images, words, sounds, and their linguistic transfer which does not contradict the information sent on the screen through all four channels, being conditioned by the synchrony of the image and the target-language text; basically, it does not alter but preserve the sound characteristics of the original as opposed to dubbing.

Besides *synchrony*, there are other aspects the subtitler needs to take into consideration when rendering the SL text into TL: a certain screen space where the translation has to fit, a certain rhythm of the speech which has to be kept, the reading time. The change of medium from oral to written triggers the use of text compression and omission of some elements of spoken language, strategies that would help the subtitler keep pace with the displayed narration. Paradoxically,this challenging side of subtitling/AVT is considered at fault for labeling this linguistic transfer method 'adaptation' and not really translation.

"Grammar and lexical items tend to be simplified and cleaned up, whereas interactional features are only maintained to some extent (e.g. through word order, rhetorical questions, occasional interjections, and incomplete sentences). In other words, not all the features of speech are lost, quite a few can be salvaged in writing, but rendering them all would lead to illegible and exceedingly long subtitles." (Cintas and Remael 63-64)

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Nowadays there is a generous offer of subtitling programs on the market, all claiming to
maximize the subtitler's efficiency, but not all of them managing to do so. One of the programs we have been working with for some time and which is worth mentioning is Amara platform used by TED OTP volunteers. TED is a platform for "ideas worth spreading", as their logo goes, a sort of 'library' of curiosity-igniting videos where, as they say, the voices of researchers, educators, scientists, innovators are amplified and their knowledge shared in the form of talks (TED Talks, TEDx Talks), lessons (TED-Ed) and events they organize. In doing so, they needed to initiate and facilitate the linguistic transfer of information and managed to achieve it by using Amara, "the largest global community and platform for captioning and subtitling video"[2], aiming at crossing language barriers by means of translation (understood as a way of furthering communication).

Amara platform facilitates the subtitling process by allowing the subtitler to concentrate on linguistic competence, knowledge of the subject matter and socio-cultural realities while simplifying the technical parameters for him/her and offering a set of guidelines and tools.[3] In 2009 TED Open Translation Project was launched, promoted as "a global volunteer effort to subtitle TED Talks, and enable the inspiring ideas in them to crisscross languages and borders."[4]

Another aspect which increases and maintains translation quality in this particular case is the four-staged workflow that is required:

1. transcription (the original transcript is provided by TED)
2. subtitling/translation (using the Amara editor interface)
3. review (an experienced volunteer)
4. approval (a language coordinator or a TED Staff Memberdoes the proofreading)

It is indeed a stimulating way of handling this linguistic effort of connecting cultures. Coming back to subtitling as generally tackled, there are certain realistic regulations/conventions/recommendations, aiming at offering consistency to the translated text, at facilitating the subtitler's work by offering guidelines, at ensuring the quality of translation. They cover the

[2]http://pculture.org/
[3]http://translations.ted.org/wiki/Main_Page
http://translations.ted.org/wiki/Ghid_pentru_traducerea_subtitlurilor_%C3%AEn_rom%C3%A2n%C4%83
[4]http://www.ted.com/participate/translate

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aspects of style, register, reading speed, line length, line breaks, typographical signs, linguistic strategies for text compression, etc.
In the article "A Proposed Set of Subtitling Standards in Europe", Karamitroglou discusses in detail some parameters which would maximize "the legibility and readability of the inserted subtitled text"[5]: spatial parameter/layout (position on the screen, number of lines, text positioning, number of characters per line, typeface and distribution format, font colour and background), temporal parameter/duration (full two-line subtitle and simple-line subtitle, leading-in time, lagging-out time, 'overlay', 'add-ons' and 'cumulative text', camera takes/cuts), punctuation and letter case, target text editing.

In what follows, we shall enumerate some of these aspects perceived as *challenges* and exemplify them by considering Romanian and English the working languages we operate with.

- Subtitle reading speed: the Amara platform (TED)has set the reading speed for 21 characters per second, whereas in Karamitroglou's article we learn that a full two-line subtitle of 14-16 words should remain on the screen for around 6 seconds and the duration of a full single-line subtitle of 7-8 words would be around 3 seconds.
- Line length: around 38 characters (Karamitroglou), 42 characters maximum (Amara). The regulation also refers to two-line subtitles in that one line should not be shorter than 50% of the other line, and the lines should be balanced in length.
- Maximum number of lines per subtitle: 2.
- Line breaking: if a line exceeds the maximum number of characters, then line-breaking is required; linguistic units are kept together (adjective and the noun it refers to, proper names, preposition and noun, relative clauses introduced by *which, who, that*, subject and predicate, article and noun, phrasal verb etc.)
- Register, number and gender: sometimes personal over generic is preferred, or generic over personal other times; politeness rules are to be followed (depending on the context, *you* may be rendered as *tu, voi, dumneata, dumneavoastră*; *should bring*, for example, as *ar trebui să aduci* or *să aduceți*, etc.)
- Units of measurement are generally translated (Google unit conversion tool proves helpful).

[5] http://translationjournal.net/journal/04stndrd.htm

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• Punctuation rules: the subtitler should follow TL punctuation rules. When translating from English into Romanian, the use of the Romanian *ă, î, â, ș, ț* is compulsory, otherwise the translation is faulty; the same goes for the use of inverted quotation marks (e.g. *"Where were you?"*→*„Unde ai fost?"* and not *"Undeaifost?"*)

• Culture-bound structures: advanced knowledge of SL and TL grammar and lexis is required in order to be able to recognize such structures (idioms, proverbs, humour etc.) and to handle them appropriately. If there is no equivalent in TL, the subtitle seeks to render a translation that grasps the meaning and, if possible, preserves the 'colour' of the original.

• Titles of works: the convention states that if there is no official translation of the title, the subtitler should avoid translating it (magazines, books etc.)

• Word order: the subtitler should be aware of the differences in SL and TL in what word order is concerned.

• Specialised terminology: the subtitler should not rush into translating such terms, but check if the equivalent is included in dictionaries that deal with specialised vocabulary (e.g. *laser pulse* mistranslated as *puls laser*, whereas the medical context required *impuls laser*)

• No use of hyphenation, boldface and underline.

• Taboo words, swearwords: these are generally toned down or omitted, yet their rendering into TL is essential "when they contribute to characterization or when they fulfill a thematic function in the film" (Cintas and Remael 197).

• Numerals: cardinal numerals up to 10 are written in letters and from 11 onwards the use if digits is advised, if the numeral is not part of an address or does not refer to days of the month etc.

• Rephrasing/simplifying/compressing the text or omission of lexical items. Cintas and Remael (145-146) discuss the quantitative reduction of the text and classify it into partial text reduction (condensation or reformulation at word level or sentence level) and total text reduction (deletion/omission of lexical items). This is conditioned by the relevance of the information, by the context and co-text, spatiotemporal constraints a.s.o.; the subtitler can choose between eliminating the irrelevant information, reformulating the information that is relevant to the viewer's understanding of the message or a combination of the two.

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e.g. *in order to be able to deliver drugs within the cells→pentru a eliberamedicamenteleîn celule* (instead of *pentru a putea elibera medicamentele în celule*)
six years ago→acum șase ani (instead of *cu șase ani în urmă*)
we can discuss→putem discuta (instead of *putem să discutăm*)
which refers to→referitor la/privind (instead of *care se referă la*)
I am going to finish the project in two week's time→voi termina proiectul în două săptămâni (instead of *urmează să termin proiectul ...*)
the book which I borrowed from the library→cartea împrumutată de la bibliotecă (instead of *cartea pe care am împrumutat-o ...*)
Tell me if it seems too late for you→E prea târziu? (instead of *Spune-mi dacă e prea târziu (pentru tine).*)
A cup of tea, please. →*Un ceai, vă rog*. (instead of *O cană de ceai, vă rog*.)
Wouldn't it be better to call him? →Sună-l. / Mai bine sună-l. (instead of *Nu ar fi mai bine să-l suni?*)
Karamitroglou (1998) refers to the omission of "padding expressions" such as *well, you know, as I say* etc., which do not have a semantic load; he also suggests that tautological cumulative adjectives or adverbs be given a single-word equivalent (e.g. *very, very big→enorm/foarte mare*)
All in all, subtitling perceived as one of the most popular practices within the field of audiovisual translation proves a challenge to the subtitler, who has to consider all the above mentioned aspects that relate to this language transfer mode. Once again,it is much more than mere adaptation of the target-language text, it is a translation practice which needs to be acknowledged as such.

Abbreviations

AVT	audiovisual translation
SL	source language
TL	target language

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