WHAT DO SUBTITLERS TRANSLATE? PARTICULARITIES OF THE AUDIOVISUAL TEXTS WITH A SPECIAL VIEW ON THE SUBTITLING OF HUMOUR

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Abstract: One of the branches of Translation Studies that has been the focus of interest over the past decades is audiovisual translation (AVT). This study aims at raising a few questions regarding the typology of the audiovisual text, which is a polysemiotic, multimedial text, deeply connected with and determined by extratextual markers, a dynamic, short-lived text, strictly governed by a series of technical, temporal and spatial constraints, a type of text that dramatically depends on how it is perceived by the audience.
In order to tackle the typology of the audiovisual text this study focuses on the translation of humour, a situation in which the challenges encountered by the translator are even more specific. The main questions resulting from the analysis are: "What does one actually translate in AVT? Are these texts or pseudo-texts? How much of the original dialogue can be translated and what is left out? With all the constraints and challenges imposed by cultural references, puns, dialects, idiolects, taboo language, rhythm of speech, etc. how can audiovisual translators make sure the perlocutionary effect, i.e. the skopos of the original dialogue was maintained? Some of these questions can be partially answered, while a few will remain rhetorical. Yet the aim of this study is just to suggest a certain attitude for the translator, who is, when dealing with AVT, challenged by a new type of text.

Keywords: AVT, perlocutionary effect, audience, humour, cultural-bound terms.

Introduction

Much has been said and written on the dichotomies governing the process of translation: fidelity versus infidelity, translator's invisibility versus translator's visibility, the possibility versus the impossibility of translation, to mention just the most important. These dichotomies apply differently to different types of texts or textual units to be translated. Certain kinds of texts belonging to certain genres allow for more "fidelity", while in others the translator is more obviously visible. The fact that issues like these are frequently revisited by researchers is good proof that the discipline of Translation Studies is still vividly looking for answers and attracts the interest of academics from different and sometimes distant fields: from linguists to anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, etc.

Special features of the audiovisual text

The paradox with AVT is that it does not represent a mere transformation of a source language text into a target language text. First of all, the nature of the SL text is completely different. The audio medial text, at least in case of subtitling, is a **polysemiotic text with a triadic structure: image, words, sounds**. Delabastita (1989: 101) has best emphasized the four basic elements that inter-relate in order to form the inter-semiotic texture of the audiovisual text: the acoustic-verbal elements (dialogues, monologues, voices, voice-off), the acoustic-nonverbal elements (musical score, sound effects, noises), the visual non-verbal elements (images, photography, gestures) and the visual-verbal elements (inserts, intertitles, images of letters, screens, news headlines, etc.). Thus the reader is also "viewer" and "hearer" of a polysemiotic entity that somehow imposes itself on its receptor with a certain

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speed, range of images and sounds. The written word does not only trigger an image, like in the case of reading a book, as images come along with it, either reinforcing or contradicting it. The sound may add information, it may even contain "narrative" elements (as certain musical themes are associated to certain actions or rhythms of actions), it might distract the reader/viewer or it might intensify an intended effect (tragic, dramatic, comic, etc.)

Audiovisual texts, dealt with by subtitlers, dubbers, interpreters or other types of specialized translators are texts that have already been altered by **code-switching** before being subject to translation; these texts represent the transition from the oral to the written code, namely from the original SL dialogue to the written TT version. There is a Catch 22 situation in the very nature of the text. The SL dialogue is actually called 'original' dialogue because it is heard in the 'original' source language. In fact, it is not so original, as it "*has been written to be spoken in such a way as to appear spontaneous. Audiovisual translators must therefore be skillful at imitating spontaneous-sounding conversation in the target language. In a sense, the translator of audiovisual texts could be considered as a second scriptwriter, whose task is to transfer the exchanges on screen in such a way that they sound believable in the target language, and could thus be identified as true-to-life dialogues and easily understood by the target audience*". (Chaume, 2009)

The impression of 'originality' is given by the "prefabricated informality" (Chaume, cited in Valdeon 2008:118) in the SL. The **orality**, or "**prefabricated informality**" of the source text has to be transferred to the target text in a manner that will ensure that the target audience gets as much as possible of the illocutionary effect as the ST audience. It consists mainly of interjections, greetings and farewells, attention signals, hesitators, politeness formulae, etc. In order to preserve naturalness in the TT, the subtitler should render the same degree of informality in his/her translation. The paradox is that these 'prefabricated informality' elements are exactly the ones that make the subject of omission, a translation strategy quite common in subtitling, due to the specific time and space constraints governing the process. It is true that target viewers who are familiar with the SL or have at least basic knowledge of the SL can recognize elements such as hesitators or greetings, farewell and attention signals, yet subtitlers shouldn't be very eager in omitting interjections and politeness formulae, especially when subtitling a sitcom, as these elements might be closely related to the perlocutionary (humorous) effect.

Moreover, the audiovisual text is a **permeable** text, mainly due to the permanent interference of the original dialogue and the multitude of cultural references it contains, that are quite often rendered by calques. AVT translators should be responsible regarding their role in the linguistic change and more aware of the importance of AVT in the general education of the target audience.

The audiovisual text is often **multi-layered**. In many situations, the SL 'text' (to preserve the inverted commas used by Gambier) does not have a single author: an entire team has contributed to its creation (from script-writer, to director, to technicians, etc.). Its translation might also be the responsibility of a team: in most cases the subtitler provides the translated version of the original dialogue and a whole technical team work at synchronizing the subtitles with the visual and audio extratextual elements. "*Any of these nonverbal systems undergo profound changes through translations, and translators need to become extremely sensitive to all that happens or does not happen as they translate a text, for it is well known that translation is not only an interlinguistic exercise, but an intercultural one as well*". (Poyatos cited in Snell-Hornby, 2006:79)

The extratextual elements give the text its full meaning, which can be completely altered if extratextual markers are neglected. When it comes to sitcoms, canned laughter, for instance, puts an extra-pressure on the subtitler, who is not only supposed to obtain the humorous effect intended by the original dialogue, but has to obtain it right before the canned

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laughter sequence, otherwise the whole perlocutionary effect would be compromised and the final audience would feel frustrated when they hear the studio audience laugh at a joke they did not have a chance to get.

Sometimes a source language dialogue uses more than one language. In this case the translator may encounter huge challenges due to the strong intercultural element. In *Fawlty Towers*, for instance, one of the main characters is Manuel, a Spanish waiter with very poor command of English. He addresses everybody in either Spanish or some sort of 'Spanglish". Even funnier are the scenes in which Basil, the British hotel owner, is using broken Spanish to make himself understood by Manuel. In order to preserve the comic effect, the best solution for the Romanian subtitler is probably to leave the fragments in Spanish unchanged (or at least to reproduce almost all words in Spanish, as Spanish and Romanian spelling and pronunciation rules are quite similar, and the Romanian viewer would not be overstressed because of them). The real challenge is the attempt to translate the original English dialogue so that word-play could still be perceived by the Romanian audience. The Spanish dubbed version, for example, solved this problem in quite a creative manner by turning Manuel from Barcelona into an Italian from Naples called Paolo. Yet this solution is only possible with dubbing, where the audience has no access to the original SL dialogue.

AVT works with a **dynamic** text-type, a text that literally moves across the screen with a certain speed (the maximum duration of each caption is around six seconds). The target viewer is not given a second chance to read the caption in case the message was not clearly perceived. If the humorous effect is compromised at one specific moment, there is a good chance that the follow-up joke would be compromised as well. There are cases, in a sitcom, for instance, when several characters speak at the same time. The resulting humorous effect is actually perceived as such by the target audience who can see and hear the characters. Yet the subtitler has to 'prioritize' and choose to translate only the funniest or the most relevant lines, or to insert two sets of captions if the dialogue lines are short enough to be exposed for less than 3-4 seconds.

Yves Gambier (2008:13) rightfully remarks that "*AV 'texts' are always by nature **short-lived and volatile**. It is not in fact that the translated texts will be read time and again for decades or stored in national archives collections for frequent consultation*". Yet, some cinematographic productions remain in archives and are watched time and again for decades. At one point they might need to be subtitled or dubbed again, because language changes continuously and the translated versions might sound obsolete. Maybe the contribution of a good translation to the success of an audiovisual production in a certain country is difficult to quantify. But logically, in the case of subtitling at least (Romania fortunately still remains a subtitling country) the viewers who really need a good translation in order to fully benefit from watching a movie or a sitcom are those who have only a poor or no command of the SL. The ones who are very familiar with or fluent in the SL only need subtitles for reassurance. They also represent that critical part of the target audience who is very sensitive to whatever they perceive as cases of mistranslation, that are invariably blamed on the subtitler.

Relationship between the audiovisual text and the audience

One of the most important features of the audiovisual text is its relation to and dependence on the target audience, be it primary target audience (the studio or live audience, as in the case of sitcoms and stand-up comedy routines), whose feedback is immediate, or the secondary or final target audience (the public watching the subtitled or dubbed production on TV, DVD or the internet), whose feedback can only be measured based on ratings. In sitcoms, the studio audience (represented by canned laughter) is actually one of the key extratextual elements to be taken into account by the subtitler. On the one hand, it helps entertaining the audience, as the sound of laughter in itself is entertaining and triggers more laughter. On the other hand, it may represent an extra challenge upon the translator, especially

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when cultural references are at stake. Some words or phrases may be more jocular in one language than in the other. If the canned laughter instance is too intense or lasts longer compared to the effect the translated joke would produce upon the target audience, the latter might perceive the subtitles as a case of mistranslation and might feel frustrated. Moreover, the translator cannot remain 'invisible', mainly due to the fact that the target audience has permanent access to the original dialogue, and the subtitles are under the permanent scrutiny of those members of the target audience that have a certain command of the source language.

All the specific features of the audiovisual text described above become even more specific in the translation of humour, especially in sitcoms. The perlocutionary effect has to be transferred in the TT not only with the same intensity, but with surgical precision, as well, so that the canned laughter instance follows immediately after the humorous utterance. Due to the fact that the text is dynamic and the target viewer has no second chance to re-evaluate a joke, the subtitler is under extra-pressure: s/he has to make proof of both humorous awareness and humorous complicity and make sure the associations triggering the humorous effect are deeply rooted in the target audience's culture, so the joke is understood. The relationship between text and audience is vital; if the target text fails to produce the expected effect on the target audience, subtitles are actually useless.

Translatability of humour in particular types of audiovisual texts

In AVT, the translation of humour sometimes confronts the translators with practically impossible challenges. To illustrate this aspect, I chose the example of stand-up comedy, which provides AVT that can be hardly rendered through translation, either by dubbing or subtitling.

Stand-up comedy is a comic style in which a comedian performs in front of a live audience, to which s/he usually speaks directly, reciting a fast-paced grouping of hilarious stories, short jokes and one-liners (jokes delivered in a single line), in what is typically called a monologue, routine or act. Although most often performed in comedy clubs, night clubs, colleges and theatres, stand-up comedy has started to acquire significant commercial distribution via DVD, internet, and mainly television, which makes it an important candidate among audiovisual texts. In stand-up comedy the feedback from the audience is crucial for the comedian's act; the stand-up comic is under continuous pressure, as the audience expects him/her to provide a steady stream of laughs throughout the performance.

The routines are quite rich in over-strong language, often labelled as adult language, which makes this type of production particularly difficult to either dub or subtitle in Romanian. Romanian television is still handling four-letter words with conspicuous caution; taboo words are being used increasingly in subtitling, yet they are not translated into equally strong language. In dubbing, this tendency cannot really be analysed, as techniques like dubbing or voice-over are only used for animation movies, cartoons, news and documentaries, where taboo items appear quite rarely, if ever. The mechanisms behind stand-up comedy are quite complex and subtle; the strong language is in itself an act of courage, but it is mainly used to cover up the seriousness of the matter the comedian mocks at or actually brings to the attention of the audience. The source text, which most of the time attacks really deep social, political or economic issues, is so heavy with culture-bound terms or social and political references strictly related to the source audience, that, in order to get the joke, the target audience should not only have an excellent command of the source language, but also good knowledge of the social and political realities behind the jokes, case in which AVT of any kind seems almost useless. Subtitling is an option, yet the resulting target text is again meant as a support for that supposedly high-brow segment of the target audience who decipher the jokes from the original dialogue and only check subtitles either to verify if they had the same good guess as the subtitler, or in order to get particular bits that they misheard or did not

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clearly understand. Sitcom dialogues abound in orality markers, yet registers are mixed (standard, colloquial and taboo language, dialects, idiolects, etc.). Stand-up comedy texts are usually monologues in which the dialectal and idiolectal elements are the main trait. Specific accents and intonation are main components of the humorous effect. These dialectal and slang elements are actual indicators of the social and cultural background of the comedian or the characters s/he embodies or ridicules. Stand up comedy shows are usually one man (or one woman) shows. The comedian actually switches roles by means of dialectal, idiolectal and intonation elements, sustained by usually vivid body language, although there are cases when the comedian barely moves, but he/she switches registers so wisely that the audience is in tears. The rhythm of speech is particularly high, and omissions can lead to important losses and prevent or cut off from the intensity of the humorous effect. Cultural references are most of the times extremely specific to the social, political, geographical and historical background of the target audience and could sometimes mean nothing or very little to the target audience, even when successfully translated. A domesticating approach would be an unnecessary favour paid to the target audience, who might be even perceived as offensive, as it underestimates the target viewer's listening and comprehension skills of the source language. At the same time, a bias towards domestication would create a feeling of unnaturalness (for example a black comedian speaking of contemporary Romanian political issues).

Thus, in the case of stand-up comedy, there is the question if this kind of audiovisual text should be translated at all, as it seems solely dedicated to native speakers or target audiences that share the same geographical, ethnical, political and linguistic background with the comedian. In this case, for the overseas audience with a good command of the SL, intralingual subtitling might be sufficient for a satisfactory comprehension of the SL original dialogue (or monologue).

Since we considered the specific features of the audiovisual text and their relation with the translation of humour, it might be worth noting the presence of audiovisual productions that could qualify as extreme forms of audiovisual 'texts' in the broad sense of the term. In **funny interpretative dance** (one of the best known representatives is David Armand, who performed his routines as guest of the British TV show *Fast and Loose*), a player mimes out a popular song while members of the audience who have no access to the sound try to guess what song it is. This hilarious mime act may sometimes be labelled as containing adult humour, because of the explicit gestures used during miming. The paradox is that the audience neither hear the offensive words, nor read them on a screen. They are actually challenged to associate the interpretative dancer's gestures with taboo language that they actually produce or "utter" mentally; the translated 'text' is actually induced in the viewers' minds by the interpretative dancer, but it is produced by the audience, who have thus no reason to be offended.

Funny interpretative dance is part of physical comedy, a common and rarely subtle form of comedy, a clownish exploitation of movement that often introduces, replaces or sustains verbal humour. Physical comedy movements are also often incorporated in sitcoms scenes, functioning as comic relief during more serious or intimate scenes. That is exactly what allows the association with audiovisual 'texts': the funny interpretative dance routine is based on a source text (the original song, for instance) and represents a translation (that is the transition or switch from one code into the other, this time from a linguistic into a non-linguistic code). It is interesting that although the resulting product is a series of apparently clownish movements, that do not involve any sort of verbal utterance, the 'translation' of the sound and lyrics into movement is only possible through linguistic associations. The most exploited elements are obviously puns, polysemous words or homonyms and homophones. In his interpretative dance routines, David Armand performs his hilarious mimic gestures that

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require his audience to associate pairs such as: *so-sow, be-bee, we-wee, but-butt, vain-vein, better-butter, to-two, I-eye, said-sad, well-well, depend-deep end, moon-(to) moon,* etc. This extreme type of pseudo audiovisual 'text' is not even subject to interlingual translation of any kind; this type of programme is almost never translated, as television companies would rather buy the licensed format of the show and tailor it into a version that would suit their national audience. It contains elements that are common to the audiovisual text and to verbal humour (image, sound, source lyrics, body movement, actors, code switching, canned laughter, word puns, verbal elements). It was briefly analysed here just to point out to the unpredictability of what we call audiovisual texts, as well as the very permeable borders of this concept.

Conclusions

As seen so far, the audiovisual text is so much more than a text. "*Of course nobody pretends that translation can dispense with language (or with source and target texts) altogether, but it is now seen as a tool or instrument for translatorial action rather than as the central object of study in itself. With this approach the definition of "text" is also widened considerably*". (Snell-Hornby, 2006:79)

Taking into account its numerous atypical characteristics, one may legitimately wander what do screen translators translate, after all? As Chaume (2004:17) states, "*It is obvious that without the presence of a linguistic code in a text we would not be able to speak of a process of translation properly*". Yet, the screen translator deals with much more than the linguistic code: s/he translates words that are intricately related to sounds, images and other extratextual elements.

The translation unit is the speech act, and not sentences or words, this is a fact. The main concern of the screen translator should be, especially when translating humour, to produce the perlocutionary effect. Cultural-bound terms should be carefully and sensitively considered, as in screen translation the audience can either be the translator's best friend and right hand or his worst enemy. Domestication is a very delicate issue, and it is more reluctant to subtitling than dubbing, due to the permanent access the target audience has to the source-language original dialogue in a subtitled film, sitcom or programme. Consequently, the screen translator has to make proof of intercultural awareness and complicity with his/her target audience, giving priority to the *skopos*. More than that, the screen translator has to know very well the target audience segment his translation is aimed at. In other words, s/he should not under- or over-estimate the target audience and should also be aware that s/he plays an important part in their education and language acquisition process. The screen translator is also responsible with deciding what to keep, what to omit and sometimes what to add to the source text in order to make his/her target version compatible with both the original dialogue and the expectations of the target audience. And last but not least, the screen translator has to prove all these qualities and take all these decisions within very strict temporal and spatial constraints, a task that most often requires quite a great deal of technicality.

Audiovisual texts are textual units and at the same time 'cultural units'. The screen translator is not only there to decipher and transfer meaning, but to mediate and negotiate it. S/He is ultimately responsible with presenting his target audience with a 'cultural unit' that is not only comprehensible and meaningful, but can also be incorporated in the target culture. As consumers of such a vast diversity of screen products, we are actually not mere spectators. These products get assimilated in our cultures, constantly bridging them.

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