

Language awareness through training in subtitling

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All humans learn better, faster, more effectively, more naturally, and more enjoyably through rapid and holistic subliminal channels.

(Robinson 1997: 2)

1. Introduction

The introduction of audiovisual translation as an independent course in the curricula of translator training degrees is a recent phenomena which is often looked upon as a means to give initial training to future audiovisual translators. In the knowledge that many of the students taking a degree in translation will not become audiovisual translators, one might question the use of such training for those who, for instance, wish to become technical translators or interpreters. The introduction of training in audiovisual translation — particularly in subtitling — in a translation course in Portugal¹ came to prove that, rather than becoming proficient subtitlers, the students attending such courses gained skills and language awareness that reflected itself in their performance in other courses and activities. This we believe to be due to the junction of two elements — translation and audiovisuals — that have been accepted as assets to language learning in general; and to the fact that subtitling calls for an enormous variety of skills that can be improved through well staged activities covering the different steps of the subtitling process.

As we have seen, language is far more than verbal codes. Language learning cannot be limited to the acquisition of vocabulary and the mastery of grammatical structure. Audiovisual translation, when dealt with in a systematic and yet creative way, can offer innumerable opportunities to improve linguistic competence and technical know how. When using it to develop the efficiency of translation procedures, we are reinforcing subliminal behaviours which will lead future professionals to render services that will reflect, as Gile (1995: 45) puts it: "ideational clarity, linguistic acceptability, terminological accuracy and acceptability, fidelity, and professional behaviour".

Furthermore, the type of exercises here mentioned will inevitably lead to self-awareness. Students will find their strengths and weaknesses and find ways to improve those areas in which they are less proficient. The fact that audiovisual messages are rich in their making and are the result of constraints of all kinds makes it possible for teachers and students to work, in context, on skills which are often drilled in less interesting contexts. Film analysis will enhance interpretative competence in general and will broaden students' knowledge at all levels. Film can be explored to all ends and issues can be raised in all domains: culture, history, sociology, psychology, and philosophy, among so many others. The learning opportunities are such at this level that one might say that all can be taught/learnt through film. Script completion will develop listening skills and can even serve as a lighter version of the tedious dictations which are still in the memory of bygone days of language learning classes. Vocabulary can be learnt in context and idiomatic expressions can be better understood with the aid of the extra informative layers that come with image and sound. Prosodic features of the spoken language such as intonation and inflection can be taken in whilst viewing and listening to dialogue exchanges. Inferential meaning can be exploited with the aid of paralinguistic elements which come with facial expression, mime, kinesics, and vocal quality and tone. Inferring and previewing can also be trained by working through narrative levels. Summarising, rephrasing, paraphrasing can be practised to produce effective subtitles. Clarity of the written text can be aimed at when subtitle readability is consciously addressed.

These are only some of the assets that can be drawn from the use of audiovisual translation, and particularly of subtitling, in the training of future language professionals. The magical enchantment of the moving image, the attraction of working with computers and electronic equipment and, above all, the fun element makes tiresome tasks light and makes language learning pleasurable. Experience has shown that, while learning how to subtitle, students

the interpretation and clarification of meaning, and mostly, when they are confronted with texts in foreign languages now to be found everywhere, ranging from the goods on supermarket shelves, to news and programmes on television, to Web pages and video games. In these less conventional learning environments, people of all ages are often unconsciously transferring between different linguistic and cultural codes, comparing and decoding, inferring and drawing meanings that are only theirs, because these are the result of personal translation processes. What comes as obvious is that each of these experiences leads to language learning opportunities, all based on translation efforts, far from the traditional classroom setting.

3. Language learning through audiovisuals

One of the greatest changes in learning scenes was brought about by the advent of television. One may now say that with the mass media, barriers fell and global communication facilities brought about new meanings to the very concepts of language and translation. Whenever the button is turned on, TV viewers are forced to sharpen their senses to adjust to the specificities of different types of texts which call for different interpretation skills. People are often taken on roller coaster rides along images and sounds that come and go at a pace that cannot be altered, often making the greatest of efforts to keep in track with the multitude of signs to be decoded. Understanding comes with multiple translation efforts which are all the more demanding if the verbal component comes in a code that is not fully mastered: a foreign language. Different countries have taken to different language transfer solutions — dubbing or subtitling — in order to make foreign spoken programmes accessible to their audiences and, in so doing, different opportunities are given to viewers to use audiovisual texts as a means for language awareness and acquisition.

Conventional educational systems have found the resourcefulness of audiovisual materials and have gradually brought them into the classroom, most of the times to add “colour” and variety to lessons on different subjects. They have also been used to advantage in language learning situations and have become interesting tools which bring in a touch of realia to classes that would otherwise be more theoretical or less interesting.

One of the main reasons for introducing audiovisual translation for language learning/teaching lies in the fact that students are given the opportunity to think about language within an enjoyable holistic approach. The amusement

element that is often connected to audiovisuals and the novelty in discovering new meaning conveyers proves Robinson's premise right (1997: 3):

As teaching methods move away from traditional analytical modes, learning speeds up and becomes more enjoyable and more effective; as it approaches a subliminal extreme, students learn enormous quantities of material at up to ten times the speed of traditional methods while hardly even noticing that they're learning anything: to their surprise, however, they can perform complicated tasks much more rapidly and confidently and accurately than they ever believed possible.

The complex make-up of audiovisual texts and the specificity of language transfer between different languages and codes allows for an enormous range of activities that enhance language awareness and increase communicative competence. Exercises can range from the receptive skills to the productive skills, and can take the form of gap filling exercises, gist summaries, note taking, and vocabulary expansion, among many others. In each instance different aspects of language usage is exercised and if, in each case, time is given to the analysis of the changes language undergoes in each instance, greater language awareness is inevitably gained.

4. Training in subtitling – an excuse for improving language awareness

In Portugal, a traditionally subtitling country, first tentative steps are being taken towards the introduction of audiovisual translation modules at university level. In the particular case of the previously mentioned degree, subtitling was introduced as a fully fledged course under the assumption that students taking a degree in translation should be given the opportunity to try as many forms of translation as possible. Given that subtitling is a national trend, it appeared reasonable to have a 45 hour module, at undergraduate level, to introduce students to the intricacies of the subtitling process.

The course was designed to be highly practical and to mimic, as far as possible, the working environment that is found in most Portuguese subtitling companies. Professional equipment was bought² and a true to life project was designed to frame the whole course. Students were invited to subtitle didactic audiovisual materials to be used in the teaching of automotive engineering³ and, in order to do so, they interacted with their "client", professional engineers and some of the teachers who were to use these materials in their classes. The theoretical standpoint for the course was found in the functionalist Skopos Theorie which was adapted to the specifications of this type of translation.

Falling back on Christiane Nord's (1991: 144) formula:

Who transmits to whom, what for, by which medium, where, when, and why, a text with what function? On what subject matter does he/she say what, (what not), in what order, using what non-verbal elements, in which words, in what kind of sentences, in which tone, and to what effect?

students were led along each step of the translation process. Once students were made aware of the importance of each component in the audiovisual context, they were drawn into the specificities of subtitling through special training in four areas: media text analysis, see Remael's article in this volume; script analysis; translation/editing and spotting/cueing. The experience proved to be highly motivating and involved students and teachers who interacted at various levels. Throughout the project, and at each stage, all those taking part in the project often stopped to reflect upon their work and to monitor progress as well as to find possible solutions for the various problems that appeared at each stage. Right from the beginning of the project something came across as "more than had been bargained for", students were thinking about their working process and were voicing their findings. In so doing they were showing a language awareness that was new to all. They were drawing upon knowledge they had gained in other courses and, as was later found, they were transposing some of the techniques to other activities and other subjects. By the end of the course, not all the tapes had been subtitled, however, both teachers and students were completely aware that in the process of learning how to subtitle they had acquired language awareness and were doubtlessly far more proficient both in the source language (English) and in their mother tongue (See Henrik Gottlieb's article in this volume).

These findings were an invitation to further analysis of how much can be learnt at each step of the way of the subtitling process. It became obvious that through training in subtitling students can improve their language skills and that the various techniques can be used to advantage in the training of translators in general and even in the teaching of languages.

5. Language awareness every step of the way

Step 1: Media text analysis

To be fully proficient in the field, the audiovisual translator needs to have basic knowledge in the making of media texts and, in order to understand the audiovisual text, he/she needs to acquire the tools for semiotic analysis.

Audiovisual translators must be fully aware that “all media texts are constructed using media language and that the codes which are chosen convey certain cultural information” (Selby and Cowdrey 1995: 13), and so, it is important that teachers make their students aware of the way signs are manipulated to produce meanings. Directors create the illusion of reality through various techniques in view of specific effects. Such construction is achieved through *mise-en-scène* and technical codes. The former overlaps with theatre — settings, props, behaviour of the actors or figures, costumes and make-up; the latter are compositional choices which are made whenever certain camera angles, lighting or shot sizes are chosen. These codes are consciously used to produce the effects which are usually unconsciously taken in by the viewer as a perceptive whole. Even though most codes are used to produce particular effects, these are not to be reduced to single pre-fixed meanings. Different interpretations will rise at every new reading and different audiences will relate to these codes in conformity with their particular cultural background.

When analysing media texts it is also important to understand how the narrative unfolds and to be aware that far from being natural, every narrative is “the result of manipulation and editing information together” (ibid.: 30). The teacher should take it as his/her task to help students break down filmic text into its compositional parts so as to discover overt and covert narratives and meanings.

Narrative analysis is complex and can be time consuming, yet it is worth taking some time to go through three basic levels of analysis with students. Analysis can start at a simple descriptive level, in which you describe what is happening in the story. Then it can go into the interpretation of the explicit meanings offered by the text, and finally it can end at a more complex level, that of discovering implied meanings. This last phase is that in which one is taken to consider “why things are presented in the way they are and how this relates to dominant social values. It is this that makes analysis at this level a more critical and analytical exercise” (ibid.: 34).

Still within media text analysis it is important to be aware of the way each text falls into a particular category. Whenever we watch a film or a TV programme we know what to expect of that particular genre or type. Part of our enjoyment comes from seeing our expectations fulfilled. A solid notion of categorisation is important to establish style and category norms. Each genre will have semiotic codes of its own and these too need to be taught and learnt for a better understanding of meaning. Last but not least, and in order to attain full comprehension of the make up of media text, one must be conscious of

agency issues: broadcasting policies, political bias, financial considerations, etc., and the way in which these have or will influence the final piece.

Up until this point we have not spoken about linguistic codes. These are dealt with in the phases that follow. For novices in the field, the awareness that in media texts meaning is greatly conveyed via non-verbal codes is a magical discovery and even language is accessed under a new light. Words seem to gain new meanings and even when they are purely denotative, they are questioned as if they could all be carrying a hidden sense.

When it comes to language analysis, media text allows for the improvement of receptive skills: predicative skills, extracting specific information, getting the general picture, inferring opinion and attitude, deducing meaning from context, recognising function and discourse patterns and markers (cf. Harmer 1983). Language is given in context, and listening exercises can be fine tuned to syntactic, semantic and pragmatic interpretation.

Step 2: Script analysis

In an ideal world, audiovisual translators would always be supplied with “a post-production dialogue list or a script or montage list. Scripts or montage lists are preferable since they will incorporate additional directorial information. Most useful of all would be an accurate post-production script with glossary” (Luyken *et al.* 1991: 50–52).

Unfortunately, the proposal for an European Broadcasting Union programme standard for TV programme material to be subtitled, which was put forward in 1987, is far from being enforced and, often enough, subtitlers need to work on all but accurate scripts and, in extreme cases, the programme has to be transcribed for lack of any written support. However annoying the situation may be to the professional subtitler, inadequate scripts are excellent tools for translator training or even language learning in general.

On the one hand, incomplete or incorrect scripts make wonderful gap-filling exercises. The transcription of film dialogue, on the other hand, is a wholesome listening comprehension task. This exercise is particularly difficult when the sound track lacks clarity, when the vocabulary is unknown or with different characters’ accents. Exploited to its full, a tiresome and minute activity may revert into multiple benefits to the language learner and into profound language awareness to the translator.

But even when the perfect script or dialogue-list is provided, there is work to be done with it. Dialogue analysis is still called for and character “face” (Hatim and Mason 2000) need be understood. Aline Remael (2001: 8 and in this

volume) clearly concludes on the benefits of dialogue analysis when she says:

The two most immediate gains, would — I believe — be, firstly, an increased insight in the way narrative strands are woven into the dialogues and help structure scenes, and secondly a greater awareness of how interactional patterns are both narrative-supporting and supported by the film's other semiotic systems.

Systematically integrated in the language learning class or translator training syllabus, script analysis proves to be a precious aid to the development of receptive skills and the improvement of foreign language competence. The greater the command of the passive working language the easier the job of translating, for less effort will be needed in the decoding process.

Step 3: Translation/Editing

When talking about subtitling in a country as Portugal, one automatically connects it to translation because very little intra-lingual subtitling is done. However, for academic purposes, it appeared important that students be offered the opportunity to think about the implications of both intra- and inter-lingual subtitling. In both events, particular focus is given to modality transfer: the same or different languages are transferred from the oral to the written mode. If students begin by gaining insight into the modality shifts within their own native language, it will then be easier to include these when subtitling foreign audiovisual materials, transferring from a second language into their mother tongue. Whenever oral text is transferred into a written form, editing is in order and the constraints involved are numerous. Hatim and Mason (2000: 430–431) clearly set out such constraints in four distinct points:

1. The shift in mode from speech to writing.
2. Factors which govern the medium or channel in which meaning is to be conveyed.
3. The reduction of the source text as a consequence of (2) above.
4. The requirement of matching the visual image.

Working through each of these points with students is usually painstaking and one of the main concerns is to avoid the urge to “cut”. To many, editing means reduction. It is easier to omit, thus eliminating important prosodic elements, redundancies, and all the colour and flavour of the spoken word. The temptation to produce grammatically correct written language often leads to a completely new message and unfortunate blunders, and the original will always be there to underline inaccuracies. Contrastive analysis between both modes and

languages can be helpful in detecting the elements which should be kept and in deciding which features of each mode are to be respected in the transfer. Once mastered in intra-lingual subtitling, these techniques can be used in inter-lingual transfers and the whole translation process is given a different outlook.

Some people question where and when the translation and the editing begin and end in audiovisual translation. If the subtitler is conscious of the implications of mode transfer, he/she can translate and edit simultaneously; if not, there will be a need for two or three distinct phases: first translation, then editing, and finally, in most cases, subtitle composition. This can be time consuming and aggravating and can be an all-in-one process if systematically trained. Given that the university's main task is to train students for professional life and since time and pressure are in the essence of audiovisual translation, students must be trained to actually produce subtitles, under circumstances resembling those of real life situations.

Various approaches can be taken towards achieving this "condensed package". One that proves to be particularly effective is working on projects that have a practical end. Translation as such should not be new to these students so they should be completely aware that "translation is a highly complicated process requiring rapid multilayered analyses of semantic fields, syntactic structures, the sociology and psychology of reader- or listener-response, and cultural difference" (Robinson 1997: 50) but yet they need to be reminded of such intricacies which, in the case of translation for subtitling, are further complicated by the constraints inherent to the medium.

In audiovisual translation the problems which arise are somewhat similar to those of literary translation with the extra stress that the fidelity factor is dictated by constraints that lie beyond words or languages. Whereas in written translation fidelity lies in two extreme points, the source-text or the target-text, in audiovisual translation fidelity is particularly due to an audience that, like the receiver of simultaneous interpretation, is in need of communicative effectiveness, rather than in search of artistic effect -as is the case in literary translation- or of exact equivalence -as happens with technical translation. According to Kussmaul (1995: 149):

The function of a translation is dependent on the knowledge, expectations, values and norms of the target readers, who are again influenced by the situation they are in and by their culture. These functions determine whether the function of the source text or passages in the source text can be preserved or have to be modified or even changed.

One can never forget that the main function of media texts is, in the first place, entertainment and subtitles should serve their purpose without imposing too much of an extra effort on the viewer. The audiovisual reader is in a completely different situation from that of the reader of a written text. Time constraints are highly determining for reading time is limited and, in most circumstances, the subtitle continuum does not allow to backtrack and reread a part that was not fully understood.⁴

The above said does not mean that audiovisual translation students do not need to work on their translation skills. What needs to be reinforced is the fact that subtitler's art is that of effective editing so as to make the most of turning the spoken word into written strings that are rich enough to convey a multitude of meanings and yet simultaneously straightforward and clear, and to go as unnoticed as possible.

If in the previous points we concentrated on receptive skills, here we can now dedicate some attention to the productive skills. The end of subtitling is the production of a new text, in a different mode and perhaps in a different language, and, in optimal circumstances, in the subtitler's native language. Often students have greater ease in speaking their mother tongue than in writing it. Writing calls for accuracy and this can only be acquired through training. Translators are, against all odds, writers. In the case of subtitling, the written text is a condensation of multiple interpretation efforts. It will always be a summary, a commentary of its own kind. It will often say what was not conveyed by words, and yet, should add no more than is required for the understanding of a scene. How much can be said, added or omitted can only be known when full understanding of the source text, all codes included, is achieved, and when complete mastery of the target language, in its written form, is guaranteed — perhaps the subtitler's distopia. Once again, the teacher's role should be one of conducting future professionals to greater language awareness and, in this particular case, to the perfecting of the written mode of the target language. Creating coherent and expressive subtitles calls for the mastering of the target language's syntactic structure and semantic wealth. All translators should have a perfect command of their language of production and this is so much more important for subtitlers who often have to manipulate language for technical reasons. Besides correction, from subtitlers we also expect effectiveness, expressivity, concision and economy. When all four attributes are attained we are in face of the best of performances.

Step 4: Spotting/Cueing

Subtitlers in different countries', and often in different companies in the same country, have different approaches to spotting and cueing and carry out these tasks at different points in the subtitling process (See Diana Sánchez's article in this volume). Some people work directly from spotting lists, others spot after the translation/editing has been done. In terms of translator training programmes what appears to be important is that students be trained to work within the time constraints that spotting imposes. This too leads to further perfecting of editing techniques. Often, spotting is done at the time subtitles are inserted in specific subtitling equipment. If that is the case, spotting/inserting could be the time for checking, correcting and adjusting. In spite of the technical constraints that teachers often find when training students on how to spot and cue — lack of specific equipment or even lack of classroom time —, this part of the subtitling process should not be neglected. However time consuming it may be, working on a one-to-one basis, sitting at the side of each student and going over his/her work consistently may mean crossing the fine line between training the average and the good subtitling professional. At this point, teachers and students can go over all the elements that were covered in their course, systematically checking on concepts and drilling routines which have not yet been fully mastered. The teacher will be taking on the role of a reviser and the student will be broken into the habit of checking his/her work as a natural part of the activity.

5. Conclusions

In all, I tend to agree with Robinson's "shuttle model" for translator training; when I defend that audiovisual translation can serve didactic purposes. I believe that if students are made to think about text as a multilayered complex that can be systematically taken apart to later be put back together, they will acquire knowledge that will speed up their performance and they will also gain awareness of the difficulties which are inherent to the job. Robinson (1997: 247) concludes:

And this is the desideratum of professional training: to help students first to learn the analytical procedures, then to sublimate them, make them so unconscious, so automatic, so fast, that translation at professional speeds becomes possible.

2. Language learning through translation

It is common knowledge that the use of language is in the making of human-kind and that language acquisition and usage can take on different forms, each of which plays an important role in one's personal and cultural identity. Specialists of different areas have not, however, come to a consensus as to the ideal approach to language teaching and learning and, in the present eclectic environment, language teachers can fall back on theories and techniques which will support their choices whichever the approach taken. Robert Tuck (1998) in his article "Translation – still taboo?" lists some of the most common approaches teachers have turned to in their practice. They are undoubtedly numerous and varied, covering from the Direct Method, to the Structural/Audio-Lingual Approach, to Communicative Approaches, Humanistic Approaches, the Natural Approach, Chomskian Cognitive Approaches, the Lexical Approach, only to mention a few amongst the most popular.

All tested and tried, these last decades have seen the ebb and flow of different methodologies and teachers have come to return to those which best suit their particular needs. Teachers' approaches to language teaching are quite often dictated by their students' needs and profiles as well as by their working environment and their own experience as language learners. Taking it as a premise that, in normal circumstances, the natural acquisition of the mother tongue comes with no need for formal education — it is part of the overall process of growth — the issue of language learning gains importance when one speaks of the learning of foreign languages. Most people learn these at school, under rather unnatural circumstances and often leave school with formal knowledge of the intricacies of such languages but with little fluency in their real usage. For decades, before the surge of teacher training programmes based on many of the theories and approaches referred by Tuck, most foreign language teaching was done through translation (Malmkjaer 1998). Even though in the last decades of the twentieth century there was an effort to move away from translation as a language learning/teaching strategy and to take language learning/teaching towards functional and communicative approaches, nowadays, teachers are no longer sceptical about using their students' mother tongue as an aid to the teaching of a second language and have come to terms with the fact that translation is, in fact, a "learner-preferred strategy [...] an inevitable part of second language acquisition" (Atkinson quoted in Stoddart 2000: 1).

This is true if we take into account the large amount of "translation" people carry out even within their own mother language, whenever there is a need for

gain a greater command of language usage, in the broadest of senses, and above all, find pleasure in manipulating text to achieve the best possible results.

If one can work towards making translation an enjoyable endeavour, one will be contributing towards higher quality language rendering and contributing towards the recognition of an often underestimated activity. The best training teachers can give their students will result in the ability to doubt and to question. I truly believe that, in a less stressful way, training through subtitling develops one of the most important characteristics of a highly professional translator the ability to stop and to do it all over again, until the best possible solution is found.

Notes

1. Audiovisual translation was formally introduced, in the academic year of 1999/2000, as a 45 hour course, in the final year of an undergraduate degree in Translation at the Escola Superior de Tecnologia e Gestão do Instituto Politécnico de Leiria.
2. Escola Superior de Tecnologia e Gestão do Instituto Politécnico de Leiria bought a full subtitling workstation (Screen — Win2020) and a classroom was equipped with 26 computers as well as with 6 video viewing posts (TV and video player).
3. The materials were tapes that needed to be translated into Portuguese so as to be used in various courses both in-house and in other schools training automotive engineers and technicians. Copyrights were ensured and permission was given for the subtitling of the materials.
4. Shuffling is possible when watching videos or DVDs but even there the natural “reading” process would not include rewinding or going back and forth, unless it were being done for purposes other than entertainment (i.e. film or language analysis).

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