Challenges in research on audiovisual translation

YVES GAMBIER

University of Turku, Finland

Introduction

Quite a number of studies on translation for TV and cinema have been published in the last ten years. But they are often limited in scope, dealing mainly with only linguistic and cultural matters, even though audiovisual is a multisemiotic blend of many different codes (images, sounds, colors, proxemics, kinesics, narrative, etc.).

Two factors probably explain this paradox: on the one hand, the linguistic and literary background of most researchers; on the other hand, the constraints of (printed) publication in two dimensions. The potential of CD, DVD and Internet-based technology is gradually changing the situation. Further, we must admit that Film Studies does not bother too much about language or the interplay between verbal and visual elements. Very few systematic studies have examined the production and reception or the cultural and linguistic impact of audiovisual translation (AVT). And what has been done comprises strangely isolated descriptions, supposedly neutral and within national borders (Catalans speak about Catalan TV, Germans tackle dubbing in Germany), as if English were never used as a pivot language, or as if AVT never had implications for a minority, or corpus research could never help in the processing of data, etc.

So far, AVT has been a sub-discipline, fragmented both in organization and in the scope of research undertaken.

Recent developments in AVT research

AVT has benefited from the rapid development of research interest and of institutional commitment, even though the field remains essentially European. However, if we consider the different modes of AVT, this development is rather uneven.

Interlingual subtitling: the fragmented nature of studies

Interlingual subtitling is undoubtedly the AVT mode that has been most widely analyzed. It involves the shift from the oral to the written code, and transposition from one or several languages to another or perhaps to two

others, as in the case of bilingual subtitling. Different strategies have been studied but there are differences, both in the number of strategies examined and in the labels applied to them (reduction, neutralization, generalization, paraphrase, expansion, etc.). As in any other field in Translation Studies, the concept and categories of "strategy" are rather vague. However, the emphasis is often on subtitling as a series of losses and omissions, forgetting or overlooking strategies such as expansion and reformulation.

This perception is based on the presumed uniformity between oral and written expression: a given number of spoken words should be conveyed by the same number of written words, as if subtitling were merely a mimetic process, and as if the two codes were similar in status and in the way they work. Surprisingly, quite a number of scholars in AVT believe that dialogues in films should represent or imitate everyday conversation, as if fiction were always copying reality.

Most of the studies on interlingual subtitling deal with case studies based on a film or a director, or a specific issue seen as a permanent "problem" in AVT, i.e. how to translate or adapt cultural references, humor, taboo language, sociolects, etc.

Isolated studies on other AVT modes

Dubbing has on the whole been relatively little studied, probably to some extent because of the division of labor between the translator, the adapter and the actors, and the responsibilities that it implies, and partly also because any analysis entails a considerable initial effort of transcription.

Nevertheless, dubbing raises a number of theoretical and practical issues, such as cultural appropriation, narrative manipulation, censorship, lip- and temporal synchronization, reception and tolerance of dubbing, synchronization between verbal and non-verbal elements (gestures, facial expression, gaze, body movements, etc.). Interpreting for the media is being investigated more often, not only in comparison with other types of interpreting, regarding interpreter selection, the skills involved and the constraints of working live and in a studio, but also in the larger perspective of translating news.

More recently, three types of AVT have given rise to quite a large number of studies, namely, intralingual subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing, audiodescription for the blind and visually impaired, and live subtitling (sometimes also called respeaking). The development of these modes can be explained by the umbrella concept of accessibility, or how to allow access to media for all. All these modes (inter-, and intralingual subtitles, dubbing, interpreting, live subtitling, audiodescription) require us to question again the traditional opposition between source text and target text, between oral and written codes, between translation (considered as

time-consuming) and interpreting (under time pressure because simultaneous with the original speech).

AVT and Translation Studies

Certain concepts in Translation Studies should be revised, extended and rethought when they are applied to AVT. For example:

- *The concept of text*: "Screen texts" are short-lived and multimodal; their coherence is based on the interplay with the images and the sound. From the conventional text as a linear arrangement of sentences, or as a sequence of verbal units to the hypertext on the Internet (with hyper-links), the concept is becoming ambiguous, if not fuzzy. Do literary translators, subtitlers, conference interpreters, and localizers refer to the same concept of "text"?
- *The concept of authorship*: In literary studies and Translation Studies, the author is often perceived as a single individual. In AVT, the issue cannot be overlooked, given that a number of groups or institutions are part of the process (screen writer, producer, director, actors, sound engineer, cameraman, editor in charge of the final cut, etc.)
- *The concept of sense*: In AVT, sense is produced neither in a linear sequence nor with a single system of signs. There is interaction not only between the various figures involved in creating the AV product, but also between them and the viewers, even between different AV productions (visual references, allusions).
- *Translation units*: The issues of text, authorship and sense entail questions regarding translation units in AVT.
- *Translation*: The very concept of translation highlights a lack of consensus, overlapping as it does those of adaptation, manipulation, transfer, and remake.
- *Translation strategy*: The concept of translation strategy varies at the macro- and micro-levels, and with respect to the socio-political and cultural effects of AVT. For example, does subtitling, because it is co-present with the original language, necessarily and systematically imply foreignizing, while dubbing would be necessarily and systematically domesticating?
- *Norms*: It is also necessary to reconsider the links between translation norms and technical constraints. Films are increasingly released in DVD form and downloaded from the Internet, with fansubs making "abusive" subtitling, that is to say ignoring accepted conventions, introducing typographic variations, adding glosses or commentaries or changing the position of lines.

- *Written and oral*: Another relevant issue is the relationship between written and oral, between written norms, dominant conventions and the written language of subtitles, between ordinary speech and dubbings (dubbese, in Italian).What is the sociolinguistic role and responsibility of the subtitler, for example?
- AVT can thus "disturb" Translation Studies. However, Translation Studies can in turn help AVT research develop more fully, by bringing to bear relevance theory, Descriptive Translation Studies, and the poly-systemic perspective.

New challenges

Towards a dehumanized work?

Some people would like to anticipate a brilliant future for AVT, thanks to digital technology. Without yielding to digitopia, we must admit certain facts:

- There is more downloading of films everyday than viewers in cinema theatres. In France, 700,000 feature-length films are now downloaded each day!
- The economic weight of the video-gaming industry is already greater than that of the film industry.
- Digitization affects all aspects of the film making process (special effects, shooting, cutting, releasing, etc.).
- DVD, video-streaming, video on demand, podcasting, portable players (mobile phone, iPod) are creating new demands and new needs, such as new formats: very short films lasting only a few minutes (we have already "mobisodes" or series for mobile phones lasting one or two minutes). These new formats could emphasize more the role of close-ups and soundtrack, thus giving more importance to dubbing.

What are the digital challenges for dubbing? Digitization improves sound quality and allows analysis and re-synthesis of the actors' voices. Today, certain software programs can clone original voices, so the dubbed voice is assimilated to that of the original actor, irrespective of the source language. This raises an important and new issue: the voice rights.

For live subtitling, speech-recognition systems change the interpreted and spotted speech into subtitles. With a combination of software, you can automatize the making of interlingual subtitles—using software for voice recognition in order to produce a written transcription, another program for automatic compression to generate condensed utterances, and possibly a translation memory program or a statistical machine translation system to

produce subtitles. Thus it is easy to consider cost and productivity from another perspective, to see revision and editing in another way.

What are or will be the translation challenges? In recent decades, translation has been defined as a complex linguistic-cultural act of communication, recontextualizing a message within another situation, sometimes for another function. With quite a number of new electronic tools, translation seems based only on words, as if translating were only a linguistic, formal transfer. Besides line-by-line translation using certain machine translation and translation memory programs (working with decontextualized strings), you can consider, in AVT, the following:

– In live subtitling and intralingual subtitling, the dilemma seems to be whether to render everything (verbatim) thanks to computer-assisted translation, which increases productivity, or to condense, taking into account the audiovisual environment and the targeted audience.
– The fansubs are also closer to the original, wordier, more word for word, making the reading time shorter. In other words, they take the cognitive effort of the viewers less into consideration.

Two questions here:

– Is the future of translation between full (or almost) automatization and amateurs (users) transferring words through different e-tools with free access?
– What can be the job satisfaction if the work is only to replace words mechanically?

The challenge of accessibility

Accessibility has for a number of years been a legal and technical issue in various countries, with a view to ensuring that disabled persons can enjoy physical access to transport, facilities, and cultural venues. Recently, accessibility has also become an important issue in the computer and telecommunications industries, the aim being to optimize the user-friendliness of software, websites and other applications. The distribution of AV media is also involved in this trend, since it is important to cater for the needs of user groups such as the deaf older people with sight problems. The implications of accessibility coincide to a certain extent with those of localization: in both cases, the objective is to offer equivalent information to different audiences. Advances in language technology mean that audio-books, set-top boxes, DVDs, tactile communication, sign language interpreting and other systems are now complemented by more recent introductions such as voice recognition, and oralized subtitles (subtitles read by text-to-speech software).

This social dimension of AVT services demands a better knowledge of viewers' needs, reading habits, and reception capacity. Much work remains to be done in this area in order to ensure that technological progress can best satisfy users' demands and expectations. Different methodologies could be applied.

Viewers and reception

Cinema goers are usually young, educated, and computer-literate, while TV viewers can be children as well as elderly people. How should we understand and measure reception with such a broad variety of recipients? Above all, reception must be defined, because there are differences between the impact of a translation upon reception (recipient's feeling) and translation as effect (response of viewers). We would like to differentiate between three types of reception (3 Rs) (Kovačič 1995; Chesterman 2007: 179-180):

- *Response* or the perceptual decoding (lisibility).
- *Reaction* or the psycho-cognitive issue (readability): What shared knowledge must be assumed by all the partners to allow efficient communication? What is the inference process when watching a subtitled program? The answers to these questions have consequences for translation micro-strategies. The greater the viewers' processing effort, the lower the relevance of the translation.
- *Repercussion*, understood both as attitudinal issue (what are the viewers' preferences and habits regarding the mode of AVT?), and the sociocultural dimension of the non-TV context which influences the receiving process (what are the values, the ideology transmitted in the AV programs? What is the representation of the Other?

So far, the "response" has been mostly investigated by experimental psychologists, who have given answers to questions such as: Can we avoid reading subtitles? When do we start re-reading the subtitles?
What kind of research and methodology could we use for response and reaction? Different variables must be taken into account:

- Sociological variables: age, level of education, reading aptitudes, command of foreign languages, hearing /sight difficulties;
- AV variables: broadcasting time, types of TV channels (public/commercial), film genre, interplay images/dialogue.

These variables could be correlated with a range of features, such as:

- Space-time characteristics of subtitles: lead times (in/out time), exposure time, subtitle rate, lagging or delay between speech and subtitles,

number of shot changes, position (left/centre justification), length, type and size of font;
– Textual parameters (semantic coherence, syntactic complexity, text segmentation, lexical density);
– Paratextual features (punctuation).

The focus of research might be on the viewers. Surveys using questionnaires, interviews or keystrokes can be used to elicit viewers' responses to questions about opinions or perceptions of subtitled programs. An experimental method can also be used to better control the medium variables (by manipulating the subtitles), in order to obtain data on the effects of particular subtitling features (speed, time lag, etc.). For instance, what are children's reactions to reading pace? Is there a subtitle complexity in relation to program type?

A third approach is possible: controlled experimental procedures –to control both the medium and the form of the viewers' response. Such procedures are designed to record actual motor behavior and then analyze optical pauses, pace of reading, line-breaks, presentation time, re-reading, degrees and types of attention (active/passive, global/selective, linear/partial), depending on whether the focus is on the image (iconic attention), on the plot (narrative attention), or on the dialogue (verbal attention). Here, pupillometry (pupil dilatation) and eye tracking are useful.

The focus of research might be on the translator (subtitler) as a key viewer. There are at least three possibilities

– *Observation* (in situ): What is the behavior of the translator while producing (performing) subtitles (somatic dimension of the work since rhythm is a key element in subtitling: rhythm of the action, rhythm of the dialogues, and rhythm of the reading).
– Interview and/or questionnaires, to investigate personal attitudes (to obtain data about translation decisions, personal representation of the targeted audiences, etc.)
– Think aloud protocol (TAP) and/or eye tracking (combined or not).

If the focus of the research is on the output, we can use:

– *Corpus design*: still rare in AVT because of the problem of compilation (need for high memory capacity), the problem of representativity, the problem of copyright, and the problem of transcription: a tool such a Multimodality Concordance Analysis (MCA) has so far been more useful for video clips and still images (ads) than for feature-length films;
– *Content analysis*: e.g. the study of different translations into the same language, different translations of the same film into different languages or for different media (TV, DVD); analysis of certain emotions, like

anger; possible regularities in the dialogues: if there are predictable elements, their translation could be automatized.

Applied research

AV media certainly play a major linguistic role today, just as school, newspapers and literature did in the past. Looking at subtitled programs, it is as if one were reading the television. Watching a 90 min. subtitled film every day means reading a 200 page novel every month. Remember that in Europe, a viewer watches TV for three hours a day (on average). Reading TV implies at least two things.

– Maintaining or even reinforcing your ability to read, which is so important when you must read computers at work, for retrieving infor-mation, etc. Channels like TV5 and BBC4 offer their audiences subti-tles, irrespective of the degree of mastery of the language concerned. Such intralingual subtitles (different from the ones made for the deaf because you do not have to signal noises, telephone ringing, door slamming, angry voice, shouting, etc.) are a tool for social or rather sociolinguistic integration. There is still no research on the possible correlation between the viewing or reading of subtitles and the presence or absence of illiteracy in a given society.
– Learning foreign languages by protracted immersion: A number of hypotheses and experiments have focused on the question of whether programs and films with interlingual subtitles help viewers to assimilate foreign expressions, sounds and intonation or accents (Gambier 2007). Such studies are limited as to a number of guinea-pigs and language pairs, and as to the linguistic elements taken into consideration (sounds, words).

Further research is needed to identify possible ways of exploiting the educational aspects of subtitles, including their role in language acquisition by the deaf and hard of hearing, and the use of AVT in the initial training of translators.

Conclusion

AVT is today a subfield in Translation Studies, separate from media translation (transediting global news) and multimedia translation (localizing videogames, websites, etc.). These three types could very soon be integrated because of the convergence between of e-tools, since most of the future documents to be translated will be not only increasingly multisemiotic, but will also include more and more different media. It is time to train research-ers beyond the traditional "textual" paradigm.

References

Chesterman, Andrew. 2007. "Bridge concepts in translation sociology", In
    Michaela Wolf and Alexandra Fukari (eds.) *Constructing a Sociology of
    Translation*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 171-183.
Gambier, Yves. 2007. "Sous-titrage et apprentissage des langues",
    Linguistica Antverpiensia 6, 97-113.
Kovačič, Irena. 1995. "Reception of subtitles. The non-existent Ideal
    viewer", *Translatio (Nouvelles de la FIT/FIT Newsletter)* 14 (3-4), 376-
    383. Audiovisual Communication and Language Transfer, International
    Forum, Strasbourg 22-24.6.1995.