

The Image: Constraint or Advantage for Film Subtitles?

Raluca SINU

“Transilvania” University, Braşov

Abstract. This paper discusses the role of one of the main components of audiovisual productions, *i.e.* the image, in the translation of films. Its aim is to highlight the influence of the image on the way film dialogue is translated, in an attempt to ascertain whether image acts as a constraint or as an advantage for the quality of the subtitles. The paper starts by examining the polysemiotic composition of the audiovisual material and the main features of subtitling as a form of constrained translation. Then it investigates two of the levels at which image and subtitles interact: the image as situational context and the linguistically relevant image.

Keywords: audiovisual text, subtitling, polysemiotic composition, image

1. INTRODUCTION

Image as part of the filmic message is generally discussed by translators when representing icons, symbols or other visual elements displayed on the screen constitutes a problem. In Chaume’s opinion (2004a: 18-19), the general norm in dealing with visual elements is “usually not to translate them (*i.e.* not to represent them linguistically) unless they are accompanied by a verbal explanation or their deconstruction is considered essential for understanding the story”. In such cases, achieving a translation that “respects coherence with the image” becomes a challenge, and for the author these situations make it possible “to affirm that audiovisual translation differs from other types of translation” (*ibid.*: 19). However, leaving aside these problematic cases, the fact that subtitles are always accompanied by image in audiovisual productions leaves an important mark on the quality and style of the translated text.

This paper discusses the role of the image as one of the main components of audiovisual productions, in film subtitles, starting from the question: how does the image influence the translation of films?

The first part of the paper presents the polysemiotic composition of the audiovisual production and the constraints it imposes on subtitling, whereas the second attempts to provide an answer to the above mentioned question identifying two distinct perspectives: the image as situational context for the original dialogue and its translation, and the linguistically relevant image, illustrated by examples the

examination of which is aimed at establishing to what extent translators can take into consideration the information provided by the image and whether the image acts as a constraint or as an advantage for the quality of the subtitles.

2. THE POLYSEMIOTIC COMPOSITION OF FILMS

Subtitling can be defined as the written translation of the spoken language of a television program or film into the language of the viewing audience; the text usually appears on two lines at the foot of the screen simultaneously with the original dialogue or narration. In the case of interlingual subtitling the written text is the translation into the target language (TL) of the original message in the source language (SL). As any type of translation, subtitling too has its specific set of constraints, which Gottlieb (1992: 164) calls “media-defined constraints”, dividing them into formal (quantitative) and textual (qualitative) ones. The first category refers mainly to space constraints (the limited number of characters per row) and time constraints (the reading speed of the average viewer), while the second one includes constraints deriving from the fact that “subtitles intrude into the picture and challenge the dialogue” (*ibid.*: 164-165). As far as the relationship between image and subtitles is concerned, at least three aspects underlined by Gottlieb (1992: 162) shape it: subtitling is an *additive* translation, which means that “verbal material is added to the original”; subtitling is a *synchronous* translation – “the original film (at least its non-verbal part) and the translated dialogue are presented simultaneously”; subtitling is a *polymedial* activity, that is “at least two parallel channels are used to convey the total message of the original”.

The manner in which the combination of channels used to convey the message of an audiovisual production impacts on the process of translating film dialogue is summed up by De Linde and Kay (1999: 7) as follows: “A film or TV programme is a combination of visual images and an audio soundtrack including dialogue. The transformation of the dialogue into written subtitles must be carried out with respect to the relations between all these components.” Thus the subtitled film is a combination of several components: *speech/text/images/music/noise* (Mayoral *et al.* 1988: 363). This polysemiotic environment can be seen as a constraint, but also as a support of the translation process. It acts as a constraint because, “when the message is composed of other systems in addition to the linguistic one, the translated text should maintain content synchrony with the other message components, whether this be image, music or any other” (*ibid.*: 363).

But the combination of channels can also support the translation of film, as underlined by Schwartz (2003): “The implied messages are not only hidden in the language but can be found visually and orally”. This means that the translator can opt to omit from the subtitles certain elements that can be retrieved by the audience

from the other channels or can supply a somewhat cryptic version of the original dialogue relying on the polysemiotic context to complete its meaning in viewer's mind.

In other words, unlike the translation of written texts, subtitling can only be performed adequately if the translator takes into consideration all the channels conveying the message, not only the dialogue s/he is supposed to render into the TL.

3. IMAGE AND SUBTITLES

According to Gottlieb (2001: 245), in films and television programmes, the message is conveyed through four simultaneous channels: *the verbal auditory channel* (including dialogue, background voices, and sometimes lyrics); *the non-verbal auditory channel* (including music, natural sound, and sound effects); *the verbal visual channel* (including superimposed titles and written signs on the screen); *the non-verbal visual channel* (picture composition and flow).

This detailed composition of film shows that image and subtitles share the same channel, *i.e.* the visual, although only the latter uses words. This might explain the important connection between image and subtitles which we intend to explore in what follows from two different perspectives. Firstly, the image always acts as “situational context” (Bogucki, 2004) for the subtitles, prompting the translator to reinterpret the notion of coherence in the case of the subtitled text in order to take into account the level of redundancy, both *intersemiotic* (between channels) and *intrasemiotic* (within one channel). Secondly, there are situations in which the image becomes indispensable in understanding the original dialogue, and consequently in translating it, for instance in the case of “verbo-pictorial wordplay” (Asimakoulas 2004).

Starting from the assumption that the polysemiotic composition of films plays an important role in their subtitling, we will be concentrating on the way this relationship is reflected in the end result of the translation process, namely in the subtitles. They represent, in Marleau's (1982: 273) opinion, “visual language”, an element to be considered next to other types of language present in subtitled audiovisual productions such as language under the form of the original dialogue, figurative language, non-verbal elements that support the dialogue, in the absence of the latter (1982: 273-274).

3.1. The image as situational context

The fact that image acts as “situational context” for subtitles implies a reconsideration of the notion of text coherence and of redundancy in the case of subtitles because “the visual supplements the verbal in complete comprehension of

screen production” (Bogucki, 2004). This means that subtitles as a type of text display features which differentiate them from other forms of written translation.

It is assumed that any type of text must be coherent, must “hang together”, which means that “at any point after the beginning, what has gone before provides the environment for what is coming next” (Halliday & Hasan 1991: 48). However, subtitles are not a text meant to hang together on its own; due to the polysemiotic composition of film and the space and time constraints, it needs the contribution of other channels of information. In fact, “subtitles are a ‘support text’ that nevertheless provides cohesion and coherence between the images on the screen, the general soundtrack, and the co-text formed by the titles themselves” (Taylor, 2000). In other words, one of the features of subtitles refers to the fact that, unlike a well-formed written text, they cannot be interpreted on their own no more than screenplays before they become films, because “understatements and lack of cohesion are acceptable in film translation” (Bogucki 2004). Given that the image is the main focus of the viewer and that we usually presume that people “intended to be coherent”, “the textual evidence (lexico-grammatical choice)” (Hatim & Mason 1994: 194) plays a less important role in subtitles than in other forms of written translation. This means that a statement like “text producers intend meaning and receivers interpret it by virtue of the textual record” (*ibid.*: 194) is not entirely true in the case of film translation. As for subtitles as text producers, they must be aware that their “text” does not always make sense without supplementary information.

The special kind of coherence displayed by subtitles prompted Chaume (2004b, quoted in Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2007: 50) to introduce the term of “semiotic cohesion” which, in addition to textual cohesion, also encompasses the interaction between the linguistic and the visual channels of a film. “An ellipsis or gap in the (subtitled) dialogue may be filled with information the viewer obtains from the images on the screen rather than another passage from the (verbal) text. Indeed, in writing, a noun may be replaced by a pronoun, whereas in audiovisual texts pronouns in the dialogue can refer to people or objects on the screen” (Díaz Cintas & Remael, 2007: 51).

The nature of film as an activity involving various channels of communication which deliver a message composed of different parts raises the problem of redundancy in subtitles. As they cover only the translation of one component of the film structure, i.e. the film dialogue, without replacing or altering the others, subtitles as a whole cannot avoid redundancy. However, the level of redundancy “must allow the same facility of decoding as for the message in the SL” (Mayoral *et al.*, 1988: 363). The authors further remark that “we cannot translate the text without understanding how the other communicative elements add to or modify the meaning” because the “non-linguistic elements of the message not only constitute part of the meaning”, but they “fulfill a communicative function” (*idem*).

When considering the influence of the image on subtitles, Díaz Cintas and Remael (2007: 49-52) observe that camera movement and editing, the setting, props, costumes, as well as the way characters gesture and look provide essential information in understanding the film, and subsequently in translating it. As all of these are part of the visual component of the film, it is evident that image plays an important role in determining the need for conciseness which characterizes subtitles. The reason for this is the fact that the combination between image and dialogue often leads to intersemiotic redundancy (Gottlieb, 2001: 247), situation in which the viewer is able “to supplement the semiotic content of the subtitles with information from other audiovisual channels, notably the image”. It is case illustrated in the following examples from the film *Some Like It Hot* (1959), directed by Billy Wilder. In example 1, the word “yacht” is replaced by the pronoun “it” throughout the scene the lines are extracted from because the objet appears on the screen.

(1)

| | |
|--|---|
| <p><i>Sugar</i>: It looked so small from the beach. When you are on it it's more like a cruiser or a destroyer. <i>Joe/Josephine/Junior</i>: It's regular size. We have three like this.</p> | <p><i>Sugar</i>: De pe plajă părea mai mic. // Când ești pe el parcă e un crucișător.// <i>Joe/Josephine/Junior</i>: E de dimensiuni standard. Avem trei așa.//</p> |
|--|---|

The word “yacht” is mentioned neither in the original dialogue, nor in the subtitles, because the audience can see the characters getting on a yacht, which makes it redundant to state it even when the characters are talking about it. But the setting is not the only element which influences the form of the original dialogue, and thus of its translation. In the next example from the same film, the look and gestures of the character of Osgood give the audience the clues they need to adequately interpret the following verbal exchange:

(2)

| | |
|--|---|
| <p><i>(Talking about his passion for showgirls which his mother disapproves of)</i> <i>Osgood</i>: Right now she thinks I'm out there on my yacht – deep-sea fishing. (He moves in closer to Daphne, looking at her intently, as he says this.) <i>Jerry/Daphne</i>: Well, pull in your reel, Mr. Fielding. You're barking up the wrong fish.</p> | <p><i>Osgood</i>: Acum crede că sunt pe iaht // Pescuind. //</p> <p><i>Jerry/Daphne</i>: Trageți undița, dle Fielding. // Nu v-ați ales bine peștele. //</p> |
|--|---|

While Osgood's remark is apparently quite innocent, Jerry/Daphne interprets it as an indecent proposal based on Osgood's mimics, gestures, tone of voice, especially as he has just finished telling her the story of his previous six or seven

marriages to various showgirls. And this interpretation triggers the character's response which would be confusing in the absence of the visual context.

In the case of the audiovisual production, the image sets the general context for the original dialogue, it completes the meaning of the subtitles and makes it easier for the viewer to understand them. However, sometimes, the role of the image is even more specific, as the relationship between image and dialogue is more direct.

3.2. The linguistically relevant image

In certain cases the image is indispensable in understanding the original dialogue and thus it becomes imperative for the translator to consider it or even attempt to signal it in the written text, or in other words to try to “include in the translation some linguistic sign that is more or less directly related to the icon on the screen” (Chaume, 2004a: 19). Such a case is the “verbo-pictorial wordplay” (Asimakoulas, 2004: 829) “created by exploiting the relation between various meanings of an expression and the pictorial components of the film”. The success of a translation in this situation depends on the degree to which the play on words and image can be exploited in the target language. This, in Gottlieb's terms, represents the *feedback* of the elements of the original production on the translation. The author (1992: 165) talks about the *positive* or *negative feedback* of the visual and auditory component of the film, referring to situations in which elements such as the image, the dialogue, the general soundtrack etc. support or hinder the subtitles.

The following pun, extracted from the film *I Love Trouble* (1994), directed by Charles Shyer, is built on the play between what is said and what appears on the screen, both elements being equally important in obtaining the humorous effect.

(3)

| | |
|--|---|
| He <i>sent</i> me on a wild goose chase. | <i>M-a trimis după cai verzi pe pereți.</i> |
|--|---|

The remark is uttered somewhere in the countryside and after the character says it geese appear on the screen. Then we see the face of the character smiling as she realizes the unintentional pun. The Romanian translation makes reference to horses, not to geese, so it preserves no connection with the image. The translator relies on the humour of the situation, the character deceived by false information. It is true that the Romanian equivalent for *to send someone on a wild goose chase* is *a trimite pe cineva după cai verzi pe pereți* which has no connection whatsoever with what appears on the screen. The visual component in the original makes the pun, while the negative visual feedback “breaks” it in the Romanian translation. What makes the wordplay apparently untranslatable in Romanian is the fact that it has been visualised in the original and the translator is forced to ignore the visual component. The *geese* pun is illustrative of negative visual feedback, where the image makes it practically impossible to rewrite the humour in the TL. Here the

image carries information which supports the character's line and cannot be removed or modified.

However, the linguistic component might have been exploited humorously by altering the Romanian expression so that it includes the translation of the word *geese*: "M-a trimis după 'gâște' verzi pe pereți"¹ and marking the alteration. Even if the modified expression is more difficult to process by the audience and it makes the character's pun an intentional one, I think the image is strong enough to support the translation.

Nevertheless, in certain situations, the visual effect can also be positive, aiding the dialogue, as it happens in the following example from *Batman Forever* (1995), directed by Joel Schumacher:

(4)

| | |
|--|--|
| Are you trying to get under my <i>cape</i> ? | Incerci să mi te bagi pe sub <i>pelerină</i> ? |
|--|--|

The pun relies on the alteration of the expression *to get under one's skin* with the meaning "to reach or display a deep understanding of someone", which becomes *to get under one's cape*. This is possible because the visual element, namely the image of Batman talking to a villain who might be suspected of being toady in order to find out Batman's identity, is enough for the audience to understand the change of the standard expression operated by the character. The pun can be rendered into Romanian since the expression has an equivalent including the word *skin* – *a i se бага cuiva (pe) sub piele* - which in its turn can be altered in the same way as the original to obtain the humorous effect.

In addition to verbo-pictorial wordplay, the visual component can also become essential in rendering certain cultural references which are triggered by visual clues: the characters' gestures, way of dressing or walking, etc. It might be said that the image helps "diminish the scope of cross-cultural translation problems" (Jaskanen 1999:33), like in the following example from *Some Like It Hot* (1959):

(5)

| | |
|--|---|
| <i>Osgood</i> : Pardon me, Miss. May I? | <i>Osgood</i> : Scuzați-mă! // |
| <i>Jerry/Daphne</i> : Help yourself! | Îmi dați voie? // |
| <i>Osgood</i> : I'm Osgood Fielding III. | <i>Jerry/Daphne</i> : Sigur. // |
| <i>Jerry/Daphne</i> : I'm Cinderella II. | <i>Osgood</i> : Sunt Osgood Fielding III. |
| | <i>Jerry/Daphne</i> : Eu sunt Cenușăreasa II. |

In fact, the example illustrates both of the functions of the image discussed here. On the one hand, without the image, the first two lines could be interpreted in different ways: a customer talking to a waitress, two people at a bus/train station exchanging newspapers, etc. They show how cryptic the dialogue may sound without the image. On the other hand, without the visual context (see Picture 1), it

¹ I would like to thank dr. Corina Micu (*Transilvania University of Brasov*) for this suggestion.

is impossible to guess why Jerry/Daphne chooses to introduce him/herself as Cinderella II.

Picture 1



But seeing Osgood on one knee helping Jerry/Daphne get his/her shoe on solves the problem. The reference to the fairytale character is brought about by the context, Jerry/Daphne drawing a parallel between the situation he/she is in: poor showgirl meets millionaire who offers to help her put on her shoe, and that of Cinderella, poor girl meets prince, she is forced to run away from him, leaving behind just one of her shoes.

4. CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, in dealing with polysemiotic texts, the translator may be constrained (or supported) by the communicative channel, visual or auditory (Gottlieb, 2001: 244). As shown above, the visual element influences both the general style of the subtitles, which are written to be understood in the context of the information provided by the other channels, but also the way the original dialogue is translated in cases where it cannot be properly interpreted without considering the visual input. In some cases, it acts as a constraint to be overcome, in other it is an advantage to be exploited, but in all cases it cannot be neglected.

The attempt to highlight the relationship between image and subtitles has revealed the fact that the question in the title is not the most relevant one, because, whether it is an advantage or a constraint, the image cannot be ignored in translation. In fact, none of the elements of the audiovisual text can, as successful subtitles depend on the translator being able to fully exploit them, despite the constraints of the audiovisual medium, the structural difference between the two working languages, or the cultural gap.

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Raluca SINU, senior lecturer in English at the Department of Theoretical and Applied Linguistics, the Faculty of Letters, *Transilvania University of Brasov*. The topic of this paper stems from and is a continuation of the research performed for my PhD thesis. The thesis, entitled *Humour in subtitling. A case study: sitcoms* (unpublished) and coordinated by Professor Liliana Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu, belongs to the larger field of translation studies and investigates the way in which certain types of humour are translated in the Romanian subtitles of American sitcoms, taking into account the particularities of the audiovisual medium.