Dubbing or Subtitling Interculturalism: Choices and Constraints

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Abstract

The creation of audiovisual products is currently one the most visible manifestations of multiculturalism in the world. From documentaries to TV series, or even from videogames to software, the interaction of cultures has an unparalleled window from which it can be shown, understood and spread through audiovisual material. It is obvious that translation and translators play a crucial role in the transmission of such material, and in view of this situation, the choice of translation modes is far from neutral or innocent. This paper aims to prove that, contrary to popular belief, dubbing can be more effective than subtitling in the manifestation of cultural differences or conflict, and that, in any case, dubbing and subtitling are subjected to specific constraints by themselves and with regard to intercultural communication (ICC) that must be taken into account in any critical review or analysis.

Keywords: audiovisual translation, subtitles, subtitling, dubbing, interculturalism

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Audiovisual translation and interculturalism

In a world in which interculturalism pervades almost every layer of society, there are few (if any) cultural constructs capable of reaching a wider population than audiovisual translation (AVT). At present, AVT is the most consumed type of translation. In our times, films and TV series reach far more spectators than books or magazines, and although it would be fairly obvious to state that translation of any kind is a form of intercultural communication, as has been already tirelessly pointed out by several authors (Lefevere and Bassnett 2001, Snell-Hornby 2001, etc.), this particular language transfer in audiovisual material involves a series of processes that require special analysis in the global field of ICC.

To start with, the process of audiovisual translation involves rendering different language modes (spoken or written) into either spoken or written language, which gives us four transfer possibilities:

- From spoken language to spoken language: Dubbing.

- From spoken language to written language: Subtitling.

- From written language to spoken language: Sonorization.

- From written language to written language: Inserts, intertitles.

Of course, although dubbing and subtitling remain the most widely used modes of AVT, other formats and variations are also possible in any of these fields, such as half dubbing, voice-over, subtitling for the hard of hearing, etc. However, in all cases, they have one particular feature in common: The translation is always subjected to specific constraints. In the case of texts transferred to spoken languages, time and synchrony (either with lip movement or with gestures) are essential; and in texts rendered into a written form, time and space (number of characters available for any subtitle and for a specific subtitle which appears for a specific period of time) represent the main restriction.

Although those constraints mean that translators are not as "free" as they are in translating a novel, for instance, we must bear in mind that the image is not always a mere restriction. Sometimes, it is a great help, because it conveys information, context and/or meanings that the translator would not be able to express in the oral or written text alone.

In this paper we will focus on films or TV series which involve intercultural communication, or, to put it in other words, relationships among people from different languages and cultures as a major element in the story line. This is usually reflected in language, in the way the characters speak, but the important aspect is that language reflects cultural differences too.

To put it in terms of films shot in English, our interest would focus more on a film like *Crash*, (Haggis, 2005), in which an accident in L.A. involves people from various cultural communities, than in a film like *My Fair Lady*, (Cukor, 1964) which revolves around linguistic and sociolinguistic differences, although within the same culture. Also, and for the same reason, series like *Lost* (Lieber, Abrams and Lindelof, 2004) attract our interest more than series like *Upstairs, Downstairs* (Marsh and Atkins, 1971): both *My Fair Lady* and *Upstairs, Downstairs* reflect social rather than cultural differences.

Dubbing vs. Subtitling in intercultural AV products

While TV series reflect the society they are created in, they also project an image towards that society. In this sense, their creators face two different dilemmas. On the one hand, they have to create a space in which they can accommodate a reality made up of several different identities and cultures. On the other hand, they must interpret that reality. Nevertheless, no process of interpretation can be neutral, and it should not be ignored that this is a profit-oriented business. That is why they must integrate all those elements and turn them into a product that can be consumed by the general public. For its part, audiovisual translation must undertake yet another task, which is the relocation of that cultural construct into a new environment in which not only the social reality is different, but also its perception.

Dubbing multiculturalism via an artificial equivalence of accents and non-standard structures from an oral language that is used as a second language may seem useful in films or series such as *Crash* or *Lost*. However, this would probably not be a good system for other films in which non-standard variants of a language are used extensively: In the Spanish dubbed version of *Trainspotting* (Boyle, 1996), the speech of the characters is transferred with teenage slang, but their Scots accent and pronunciation become standardized. After all, as LeBaron points out: "Cultural conflict does not emerge from every difference […]. Only when some aspect of our differences becomes salient and nudges the way we hold our identity or meaning does difference translate into conflict" (LeBaron 2003:28). Likewise, in the dubbing of a film like *Slumdog Millionaire* (Boyle, 2008), there is no need of specifically conveying the idea of English spoken as Indian English in the Spanish version. The problem arises when neutralization applies to all the languages spoken in the film, as happened with the dialogues in Hindi, which were subtitled in the original version but dubbed, the same as the English dialogues, in the Spanish version. These practices greatly sever the amount of information conveyed, and can only be explained by the rejection towards subtitling that is observed in Spanish audiences.

In this context, we believe it can be held that —despite the many drawbacks that some people attribute to it— dubbing can be a better way of rendering this cultural diversity and the way in which it affects communication. After all, oral language is the place where *englishes*, as defined by Ashcroft and his colleagues (Ashcroft et al. 1989:8), can grow and regain its proper place. It is within this context that oppressed, outlawed or displaced cultures can be displayed through language. This claim has been a constant demand of postmodern and postcolonialist authors, such as bell hooks, who talks about "language as resistance" (hooks 1995), or Gloria Anzaldúa, who defends "wild tongues" as something that "cannot be tamed, only cut out" (Anzaldúa 1987:54).

Multiculturalism and cultural production trends

The age of multiculturalism in which we live needs to be reflected in our cultural production. Dora Sales has remarked that cultural mixing is growing into an unstoppable trend (Sales 2004), mainly through migration flows. However, it would be naïve of us to believe that immigration flows are equivalent to cultural flows. In fact, an average of more than half of the fiction broadcast in 15 European countries still comes from non-European countries (a euphemistic term that has become a contextual equivalent of "the United States" in this field), according to the European Audiovisual Observatory's Volume *Trends in European television*, which is part of its *2009 Yearbook on film, television and video in Europe* (EAO 2010). Even with the advent of protectionist measures in the industry, audiovisual products imported

from non-European countries still represent more than 60% of the total broadcast in Spain. Although this is clearly a more reasonable figure than what we had 15 years ago, which was 95% (Díaz-Cintas 2003a:193), it is still obvious that we mainly receive the image that is projected by the USA, and this is reflected in the fact that in such cases all interactions, identities and cultural representations are structured around an English versus non-English axis. Even more, what is perceived as "standard", "non-exotic" or "normative" is not only English, but specifically American English (Steiner 2001-2002). Therefore, although immigration trends, by definition, do not come from more developed countries, cultural trends normally do.

The case of *Lost*

In view of this situation, the choice of *Lost* as the subject of our research is clearly not a random one. The series follows the lives of plane crash survivors on a tropical island somewhere in the South Pacific, but none of the passengers on the plane that crashes on the island actually come from the island. As it turns out eventually, not even the "original inhabitants" of the island were born there. Therefore, what emerges from this plot is that we face a virtual space in which each and every one of the characters is an immigrant. In such a context, the concept of *alterity* should be either ubiquitous or completely absent. Whatever the case may be, we cannot forget that we do not face an ideal utopia which is self-introduced to us, but something presented as a cultural product that has been manufactured, as occurs in the vast majority of cases, by a Western dominant power which will try to ignore certain views and impose others, often by means of stereotypes.

This play on stereotypes has not been hidden by the creators of the show, and it can be immediately recognized by viewers and actors alike. However, they do not merely present us with a series of clichés; they also subvert them in quite innovative ways. For example, the image of the Asian woman, who is presented as the submissive and obedient wife Sun-Hwa Kwon (masterfully played by Korean actress Yunjin Kim), also shows a rebellious side, as she is learning English in order to leave her husband and start a new life in the United States. Similarly, the character of the hillbilly from the south of the USA, who, at the beginning, is shown as a violent brute, is soon depicted as one of the very few people in the series who actually reads books and enjoys them. As Daniel Dae-Kim, the actor who plays Jin, the Korean husband of Sun, has declared in an interview: "The writers were smart enough to show us a stereotype and then flip it on its head." (Dae-Kim, 2010)

However, fascinating as it would be to analyze the global representations of cultures, powers and stereotypes in a context such as this, which is at the same time a cultural and a physical borderland, as understood by Benito and Manzanas, and Suárez Lafuente, respectively (Benito and Manzanas, 2002; Suárez Lafuente, 2002); we wish to focus our attention on the specific difficulties associated with translation, as a show with these characteristics presents the translator with the challenge of finding a balance in the representation or integration of otherness. As Dingwaney stated, there is a "complex tension that results when a translator confronts what is alien and struggles to achieve the familiar in the face of otherness, without either sacrificing or appropriating difference" (Dingwaney 1995:8).

Constraints and ICC

The examples given here come from research for a minor dissertation carried out by J. David González-Iglesias, but other papers following a similar line of work have been produced at the University of Salamanca, such as the PhD dissertation on the translation of Disney films by Luis Iglesias, which devotes a chapter to the problem of translating non-standard accents and dialects in characters such as the dogs in the film *Lady and the Tramp* (Geronimi, Jackson and Luske, 1955) or the vultures in *The Jungle Book* (Reitherman, 1967). This area of research has proven to be particularly fertile, as audiovisual translation offers an excellent field of observation and practice for the study of ICC.

In *Lost* we are presented with several different characters coming from very diverse places of the planet. From Arabs to Koreans to Germans, along its six-season run, the series has introduced characters from more than 30 different countries in all continents. The use of English as a *lingua franca* is not always completely justified by the context in which the communication takes place, and the transfer of those situations into another language sometimes puts the translator in a difficult position in which he or she cannot always choose the best option.

Dubbing constraints

The case of Sayid, an Iraqi soldier who was on the plane, is particularly helpful in the illustration of our point. In the original version, whenever he addresses the rest of the castaways, he does so in English. The grammar and vocabulary he uses are always "correct", which denotes that he is a fluent speaker of the standard language. However, we can also observe that this is not his mother tongue, because his pronunciation presents certain quirks that single him out as a non-native in English. These nuances include the use of vowels or the alterations on the Standard English alveolar and aspirated /t/, which becomes dental and non-aspirated.

Accordingly, the Spanish dubbed version includes phonetic traits that mark Sayid's speech as that of the user of a second language. Some of them are the traits typically heard in Spanish spoken by people who speak Arabic. Voicing of /s/ to /z/ is one of the most typical. Given that all these marks are merely phonetic and they do not appear in the grammatical or lexical layers of the language, subtitling cannot properly reflect the speech of the speaker, and the linguistic characterization of the speaker in that case will be lost to any Spanish viewer without a high level of spoken English. Another interesting detail is that when Sayid talks to other Arab speakers —where we imagine he would be speaking Arabic— they all use English to communicate with each other. Obviously, this context would immediately be recognized as a fake, were it not for the "willing suspension of disbelief" that we also find in novels, coupled with the fact that the English they all use presents the same traits we have seen when they are actually speaking English.

This situation (the use of English as a vehicle for communication between non-English native speakers who share a different common language as their mother tongue) is a common technique, used instead of subtitling, in an attempt not to strain the source language audience with a forced reading activity. However, when the scenes with such dialogues are shorter, as is the case of the Korean couple in the original version (which uses subtitling from Korean) subtitles offer an excellent translation alternative to dubbing, in that they preserve completely the verisimilitude of the interaction and call for no suspension of disbelief on the part of the public.

On a different line, there are several Hispanic characters along the series from three different generations, usually within the same family, ranging from immigrants to their grandchildren. Consequently, different levels of linguistic integration can be observed, along with varied pronunciation quirks, which pose an interesting challenge for dubbing into Spanish. The language variant of Spanish that is presented in the first season of the series is Mexican Spanish, and it can be heard from members of different generations in the same family.

First of all, Hugo "Hurley" Reyes, played by Jorge Garcia, is one of the survivors of the crash. He is the son and grandson of Mexican immigrants. As a second-generation immigrant, Hugo's accent in English is completely neutral, but its speech includes some words in Spanish, although only within the family environment. As a reflection of this neutrality, the dubbed version into Spanish, performed by David Robles, presents a standard Castilian Spanish accent that lacks any nuance that may reveal its Latin American origin.

On the contrary, his mother, Carmen Reyes, played by Puerto Rican actress Lillian Hurst, is what is usually called a "1.5 generation immigrant"[1]. This term embraces those people who immigrated into a country when they were very young and they keep the culture and traditions of their country of origin, but their assimilation and socialization process is still taking place in the country of destination. The speech of Carmen Reyes presents more terms in Spanish than her son's, and she presents a slight, although typically Latin American accent. Consequently, the dubbed voice, by Pilar Puchol, merges all /θ/ and /s/ sounds into /s/. This trait is easily associated in Spain with a Mexican accent, but, at the same time, is not excessively marked, because it can be heard in the Canarian dialects or dialects from central Andalusia, all of them within Spain.

The case of Hugo's father, David Reyes, is similar to Carmen's, because he is an immigrant that arrived at the United States when he was young. David, played by Mexican-born actor Cheech Marin, presents a slight Mexican accent when he speaks in English. However, contrary to the previous case, the dubbed voice in Spanish played by Carlos Kaniowsky, portraits a completely neutral Castilian Spanish accent, with none of the features of Carmen Reyes' speech or other marks that can reveal his origin.

The last case within this clan is Tito Reyes, Hugo's paternal grandfather, played by visual effects supervisor Archie Ahuna. This character makes a very brief cameo, and there is no information regarding the voice actor that dubs its voice into Spanish. However, it is important to note that both the English and the Spanish versions present a greatly pronounced Mexican accent. This can be due to the fact that this character is a first-generation immigrant, but also to a trend that tends to highlight non-standard pronunciations in those characters with more brief appearances.

Again, all these examples, which can more or less reflect the identity of the characters, are diluted into the standard version of written Spanish in the subtitles. Therefore, especially in shorter appearances of characters with non-standard English, we propose that dubbing may be a better alternative than subtitling, in the sense that it is capable of conveying much more socio-cultural information for untrained viewers than a text (subtitle) in standard Spanish that requires two different levels of interpretation. On the one hand, the audience has to read the subtitle that is presented to them, and on the other hand, they must simultaneously perceive the original dialogues of the character as a non-standard utterance, with all the connotations it may bring along.

Subtitling constraints

Another aspect that interests us, as part of the process of intercultural communication involved in Screen Translation, is the extent to which the traditional standards set out for subtitling seem to have been altered, especially by the DVD market, and whether this may cause problems in communication.

It cannot be denied that the widespread proliferation of DVDs as a common element that is integrated in computer equipment has resulted in a crucial qualitative leap in this field. The innovations of this medium are decisive with regard to the experience of the audience, who has now access to any linguistic combination it prefers (Díaz-Cintas, 2003a:198; 2005:13), as well as to the translation mode that it may choose. More over, through subtitles and newly dubbed versions of audiovisual products, the audience has an available updated use of the language (O'Hagan, 2007:165). However, the main changes that are brought by these new contributions might be those that are related to the research methodology. For example Kayahara (2005) already points out that the arrival of the DVD means that AVT researchers do not need two video tapes any more in order to work with subtitles and dubbed versions at the same time: Now everything is in the same place.

Another virtue of the use of new technologies in AVT research, derived from the use of DVD but independent from it, is the complete digitalization of the process. Nowadays, we can perform all the stages for the creation of a corpus from our computer, as was already pointed out some years ago by the "Gent-Tau" research group (De Yzaguirre et al., 2005), which had a corpus with documentary scripts (both original and translated versions) in a digital format in order to study them.

In any case, this type of study will perhaps prove to be more interesting for places like the Nordic countries where subtitling is basically the main form of AVT. It is our impression that, in Spain, not many people choose the subtitled options (on DVD or TV channels that allow it) unless they know the original language fairly well and use them as an aid.

We will also use _Lost_ here as our corpus of study in order to interpret subtitling as a vehicle for ICC. First of all, we face the fact that, in most cases, subtitling is a mere extra feature of the product, as in the case of DVDs. Moreover, non-dubbed films or series that are only subtitled are seldom consumed in Spain. Therefore, what we propose here might be more relevant for subtitling countries. In this regard, further research into the subtitling speeds in those countries and their diachronic evolution may be of great interest.

It can be seen, from the guidelines provided by several authors, such as Mayoral (1993), Castro Roig (2001) or Díaz-Cintas (2003b) that the maximum reading speed for subtitles in Spain was 16 characters per second. This is slightly over what was used in cinema translation traditionally, which was 15 characters per second, (Ivarson 1992), but it is what came to be used for TV/video/DVD in most places, certainly in Spain, although speed varies from country to country —in Belgium, Flemish TV establishes a maximum limit of only 10 characters per second.

The academic literature also indicates that the number of frames between subtitles (the "break") should be at least 6 frames, which represents one quarter of a second (Bravo 2004), although other authors (Ivarsson 1992, Castro Roig 2001) suggest a pause of only 4 frames, or even 3 frames (Mayoral 2001, Díaz-Cintas 2001) with 2 being allowed in exceptional cases (Castro Roig 2001).

J. David González-Iglesias developed a software system to research standards actually being put into practice in the subtitling of films and TV series on DVD in Spain. The program analyzes any given subtitle file, compares its parameters with a set of pre-defined "standard" or "normal" values and returns all the incidences in which those values have been trespassed. In our case, we defined a reading speed of 17 characters per second, allowing for a small recommended 5% margin on the 16 characters per second established before. We also looked for any break of less than one-fourth of a second (i.e.: 6 frames).

The results show that the standards used are in many cases not the ones traditionally recommended:

- Reading speed is higher than 17 c.p.s. in 27% of all the subtitles in the First Season of the series.

- In over 50% of subtitles, breaks are less than one-fourth of a second, and the average for these "quick breaks" is about one-twelfth of a second (2 frames).

Our initial hypothesis was that the speeds would increase, because the spotting is given by the English master file, which pre-defines the times in which the subtitles appear and disappear on the screen. However, we observed that the percentage of subtitles in English with a required reading speed of more than 17 c.p.s. is higher than those in Spanish. This is mainly due to textual reduction techniques applied in the Spanish version, and to the fact that the pre-defined master file with the time spotting has been altered in some places in order to allow more readable subtitles. This is an indicator of good practice in the Spanish subtitling for *Lost* on DVD, since strict adherence to the English master titles has been singled out as detrimental to translation quality: "There can be no doubt that the requirement to replicate the English master titles in [other languages] only detracts from the creativity and independence of the subtitler" (Díaz-Cintas 2003a:202).

In any case, the increase in reading speed (and also in the number of characters per line) in DVD subtitles suggests that it may be worth conducting research, especially in subtitling countries, into whether this "breach" of previously accepted standards is making the reception of the translated message harder (thus affecting ICC), or the audiences have changed over time and are able to assimilate the new standards.

Conclusions

The difference between immigration and cultural production trends in the developed world, together with the advent of truly global audiovisual creations, is the origin of many situations that need to be dealt with carefully in the context of intercultural communication, and more specifically of their translation. The combination of both realities in any developed country creates a scenario in which speakers of various origins use the language of the country as a second language and as a *lingua franca* in order to communicate and to receive the cultural products offered to them.

The decisions reached by the translator, therefore, present undeniable consequences for the communicative process. In the case of dubbing, the "screen dialect" the audience can hear acts as a vehicle for the transmission of the perceived identities that exist in the country they live in. These perceptions are never neutral or innocent, as they mirror the collective representation of the *others* vis-à-vis our own cultural identification. In this sense, the use of stereotypes deserves special attention, because its implementation in the translation perpetuates the status quo, whereas its subversion creates a new image that will, for its part, become a new established construct. In any case, we can conclude that dubbing as opposed to subtitling enables the translation to reflect cultural differences implied in the way languages are spoken, and this would appear to be more effective for ICC.

Meanwhile, subtitling standards seem to be changing with the advent of DVD, increasing reading speed and reducing the time between subtitles. We have yet to determine if these new parameters are applied homogeneously to all the texts, or if certain characters or situations are treated differently. Be it as it may, whether this is an aid or a hindrance to communication (ICC, since this is translation) remains a mystery,

but an especially relevant one for "subtitling countries". Hence the need for further research in the field of "global" TV series and their translation as a sample of the cultural images we receive, the ones we perceive and the ones we project towards others.

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Note

sup>1 Chavez (2008:52) offers an in-depth description of 1.5 generation Latinos as well as of their integration with the North American culture.

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