

# DUBBING & SUBTITLING – THE VISUAL & ACOUSTIC PHONETICS IN FILM TRANSLATION

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The contemporary world is shrinking increasingly smaller: in the age of digitalization, corporeal boundaries among homelands are incessantly obliterated. The latest hi-tech expansion in such fields as film industry, mass media and communication are physically powerful features that – by generating a world’s viewers or transnational receivers – have a say in the amalgamation of translation process. Translation in any of the above stated fields, especially in film industry, grows to be predominantly imperative, for it rubs out linguistic and cultural borders to fuse nations.

It is a noticeable verity that translation process in mass communication plays a very crucial component in determining cultures and the associations between them. In inter-semiotic rendering mode – especially in film translation, this transfer of culture encounters a greater challenge. Even though the old wine bottle of ‘untranslatability’ is not extant today, film as a ‘text’ foregrounds some other cross cultural linguistic queries.

The study of film translation requires an *interdisciplinary effort*, including specific contributions by film and TV professionals, psychologists, mass communication experts, phoneticians, socio-linguists, film semioticians and translation scholars. But many researchers have so far favoured to dedicate their vigour to the expansion of a hypothesis of translation. Moreover, subtitling and dubbing are often overseen by the respective constrictions of ‘text compression’ and ‘lip synchronicity’. This piece of evidence has been taken unreservedly as satisfactory driving force for meeting the requirements of film translation as a figure of ‘adaptation’, rather than ‘translation proper’. Adaptation is a field where the translator can take unlimited freedom. The methodology of film translation should not be restricted to the theories of adaptation only.

What are the basic proceedings to establish the principle governing film translation in the target system? Which of the languages is/are selected for such translations? Are there any special parameters governing this selection? These questions can be answered only after considering the fact that the issue of the various possible techniques of film translation is greatly complicated by the particular *semiotic nature* of the *total film sign*.

Dirk Delabastita, the Belgian translation theorist, details some of the significant features of the *film sign* in his article, *Translation and the Mass Media* (1990):

- 1) Film communication usually proceeds through two channels – the visual channel (light waves) and the acoustic channel (air vibrations).
- 2) The verbal code, narrative codes, vestimentary codes, moral codes, and cinematic codes shape a film into a complex meaningful sign.

As an artefact of mass communication the broadcast and manoeuvring of films and fragments of films are subject matters to certain cultural restrictions. On the basis of these dissimilarities, the researchers are capable of discriminating four types of film signs:

- 1) Verbal signs transmitted acoustically (dialogue).
- 2) Non verbal signs transmitted acoustically (background noise, music).
- 3) Verbal signs transmitted visually (credits, letters, and documents shown on the screen).
- 4) Non verbal signs transmitted visually.

These four categories of film signs will constitute one axis of film translation. Traditionally, the usually accepted techniques of film translation are ‘Dubbing’ (*substitutio* of acoustic/verbal signs) and ‘Subtitling’ (*adiectio* of visual/verbal signs).

The former, if one gets wrong, could crush a classic scene. The audiences of the UK and the US have a propensity to watch foreign movies with subtitles, and dubbing is by and large left for films and television sequences intended for kids. As the viewers mature older, they prefer to listen to a film’s original language which gives a sense of place and appends to the ambiance and environment of a film. This comment doesn’t have a sweeping nature to negate the other – that is, there are some western movie makers who use both dubbing and subtitling in their studios/ television broadcasts.

Dubbing does not always follow the original dialogue and translate it literally into another language. The question of equivalence is, sometimes, sacrificed mercilessly. The original script is kept aside and only the visuals are considered in certain cases of this type of translation. This practice is so common in Germany, which has more foreign-movie-dubbing studios than anywhere else in the world. Such re-adaptations may create bad dubs. But, on the other hand, some other dubs have been performed to make them more attractive in particular countries.

Dubbing is a regional thing. The vernacular incomprehensibility may pose a real threat to the filmgoers. Hollywood movies are dubbed for around 90 percentage of non-English languages including Malayalam. A blockbuster movie undergoes the process of dubbing into minimum 30 languages. In India, the latest Hollywood production *Spiderman 3* has been dubbed into 5 languages: Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Bhojpuri, and Malayalam.

The *voice-over dubbing*, where the original dialogue is lowered but still sustained under the voiced over exchange of ideas, is preferred by the spectators of the western countries to the *lip-sync dubbing*, where the speaker depicts what is being said in a narrative account spoken over the original dialogue. The lip-movement issue is still an unresolved one in both the above mentioned varieties. Even though many available technological systems including the Video Rewrite can be used to minimize this issue, no tool has yet been identified to overcome the futility of this imperfection. Lip-syncing is complicated and time consuming in the action of dubbing. A horrific dub is able to devastate even the greatest content. Bad translation, dreadful casting, horrific voice, pitiable quality control – all these lead to a bad dub.

Istvan Fodor, a Hungarian author, concentrates mainly on the phonetic side of the film dubbing problem. He has argued that we need a ‘visual phonetics’ in addition to ‘acoustic phonetics’ in the context of film dubbing. We understand things not only from what they speak but also by looking at their mouth or lip movements. The problem is of sound/image synchronicity in dubbing. The differences in the visual impact are caused not only by strictly phonological features but also by the

divergence between various paralinguistic and gestural patterns such as facial expressions and body language.

Although the integer of dubbed foreign productions in the UK is low, the contrary is the case in some other nations. In countries like Italy, France, Spain, Turkey, Hungary, China, Iran, where the production of good films are frequent, dubbing is so commonplace that some voice/dubbing artists are even allocated to particular actors.

Marcus Off, the popular German dubbing artist, was cherished with great accolade in his voice for Johnny Depp in the German release of the fantasy adventure series of *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003) whose tone of voice had been a key to the box office success of the film in Germany. Ms. Bhagyalakshmi, the living dubbing legend in the Malayalam film industry, cannot be wiped off in the making of the history of the success behind some character performances of actresses including Shobhana.

Mohd Sheikh, a voice actor of the dubbing company Media Movers says, “Dubbing is a tricky art. Emoting with more focus on matching the lips can be an arduous task.”

When non-native languages were prohibited in Mussolini’s fascist Italy, films were dubbed into Italian. Since the early 1960s, foreign language films have been disallowed from being dubbed into the Kannada language to save from harm the domestic film production. Dubbing was also banned in Portugal in 1948, again for protection, but subtitling was acceptable. Films were also censored so that some sensitive expressions – such as communism or colonialism – were substituted.

Since the early years of cinema, filmmakers have used on-screen text to add meaning to their image. Whether dialogue cards between cuts in early silent cinema, or modern foreign language subtitling, written text has always played an important role in enhancing picture and sound to bring conception and comprehension to the cinema. Today, subtitling is an imperative tool for studios and distributors in making a film more reachable to intercontinental audiences and to hearing-impaired viewers. The work required to create release prints with subtitles is substantial and has traditionally involved many different fields of competence.

The cinema subtitling practice commences with the translation of the spoken word and concludes with the audience being presented human-readable text as subtitles on the cinema screen. Subtitles may be a secondary or explanatory title; or it may be a printed statement or fragment of dialogue appearing on the screen between the scenes of a silent motion picture or appearing as a translation at the bottom of the screen during the scenes of a motion picture or television show in a foreign language. The subtitler has to represent in the written mode what is spoken on the soundtrack of the film.

People who read subtitles do not exhibit the typical eye movement patterns of ‘ordinary’ reading behaviour. Rather, they make quick jumps from one keyword to another. The whole process of subtitle perception becomes customized, so that viewers who have no need of subtitles find it hard to avoid reading them. It is claimed that subtitling demands a considerable amount of cognitive effort on the part of the viewer or reader.

The lowliness of film translation (as opposed to literary rendering) is evidently noticeable while discussing the challenges confronted in this area. There is a trend, even among the film subtitling practitioners, to look at film subtitling as adaptation, not translation. This tendency to exclude film subtitling from the province of translation cannot be justified; and that the recent attitudes to film subtitling needs to

be altered, so that film subtitling is promoted and elevated to the stage of literary translation.

Despite all the achievements in the study of film subtitling, there is still a broad scope for academic research in this field. As J. Cintas of The European Association for Studies in Screen Translation (ESIST) notes:

Approaches to translation which have made a large impact on areas such as literary translation, are still yet to be applied to subtitling (63)

It is factual that the quality of film subtitling is usually not high. However, the bookselling industry – like film industry – is also filled with poor quality translation products. The commercial dimension of the film industry is an unavoidable aspect sometimes neglected by the academic researchers when commenting on the quality of the product. Film subtitling should truthfully communicate the original meaning. To be more precise, lexis and grammar of film subtitling should put across the equivalent meaning encoded by lexis and grammar of the audio-visual text of the movie. Hence, to assess the quality of film subtitling, lexical and grammatical choices made in the course of it may be critically analyzed in terms of whether or not they ensure rendering the original meaning accurately.

In describing the relationship between original and translated films, the researcher should be able to draw upon the descriptive apparatus evolved by the main stream translation studies. In both dubbing and subtitling, special attention should be paid to:

- 1) The rendering of particular language varieties.
- 2) The rendering of literary allusions.
- 3) Different treatment of various special types of verbal message.
- 4) The rendering of word play and other forms of humorous language use.
- 5) The rendering of taboo elements.
- 6) The rendering of prosodic features.
- 7) The translator's attitude towards loan words and foreign idioms.
- 8) The possible introduction of genre makers.

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