

Film Subtitling: A New Research Genre in Africa

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Abstract

Subtitling is one of the modalities or modes of language transfer like dubbing, voice-over and audio-description which are used in the area of screen translation or audiovisual translation (AVT). It has a fairly long history and is an ever-growing specialisation across the globe. It is firmly established in such European countries as Belgium, Denmark, Portugal, the Netherlands, Finland, Norway and Sweden, in Israel, in Australia, and in a few countries of Asia such as Malaysia, Singapore and Taiwan and of South America such as Argentina, Bolivia and Peru. In Africa, subtitling is an emerging university discipline in the field of Translation Studies (TS). It is gaining ground in such countries as Cameroun, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Egypt, Zambia, and South Africa.

While research in subtitling is far advanced in Europe and other parts of the world, Africa is lagging so far behind that it is always under-represented at international AVT conferences. It is against this background that the present paper deals with the status of subtitling as a new research genre in Africa. The purpose of this paper is thus to sensitise the students and other researchers in translation to the potentialities that subtitling offers in the African context. The hypothesis underlying the paper is that subtitling is both a burgeoning and captivating area of study and that it opens new avenues in AVT research.

Keywords: Subtitling, Contrastive linguistic studies, Multilingualism, Foreign language teaching, Literacy.

1 Introduction

Subtitling is one of the main modalities or modes of language transfer like dubbing, voice-over and audio-description which are used in the area of screen translation or audiovisual translation (AVT). It has a fairly long history and is an ever-growing specialisation across the globe. It is firmly established in such European countries as Belgium, Denmark, Portugal, the Netherlands, Finland, Norway and Sweden, in Israel, in Australia, and in a few countries of Asia such as Malaysia, Singapore and Taiwan and of South America such as Argentina, Bolivia and Peru. In Africa, subtitling is an emerging university discipline in the field of Translation Studies (TS). It is gaining ground in such countries as Cameroun, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Egypt, Zambia, and South Africa. Training and research in subtitling are being carried out in Cameroun at the *Institut Supérieur de Traduction et d'Interprétation* (ISTI) in Yaoundé, in Egypt at the American University in Cairo (AUC) and in various

places in South Africa, namely, North-West University, the University of Pretoria, the University of the Free State, and the University of the Witwatersrand.

The purpose of this paper is to sensitise the students and other researchers in translation to the potentialities that subtitling offers in the African context. The hypothesis underlying the paper is that subtitling is both a burgeoning and captivating area of study and that it opens new avenues in AVT research. Thus the paper is divided into five sections. Following this introduction, the second section discusses the theoretical background to subtitling. It defines the term 'subtitling', provides a brief history of subtitling, and describes the different types of subtitling. The third section investigates the current issues in subtitling. It focuses mainly on the linguistic, cultural and educational issues. Based on these issues, the fourth section examines possible areas of research in film subtitling in Africa. Particular attention is paid to the relationship between subtitling and TS, subtitling and contrastive linguistic studies, subtitling and multilingualism, subtitling and foreign language teaching, and subtitling and literacy. The last section concludes the paper. It recommends the incorporation of subtitling into the academic programme in African universities and invites both students and researchers to embark on doing research in this new discipline.

2 Theoretical background to subtitling

Subtitling is, as Nir (1984: 82) rightly says, "the most prevalent form of [film] translation. It is used in all kinds of feature films, popular-science films, and news items in which people speak a foreign language." Subtitling is also an area of study that is developing rapidly in Africa due to its functionality, versatility and adaptability. This section aims to clear the ground by providing the reader with some background information on its historical and theoretical aspects.

2.1 A brief history of subtitling

The history of subtitling is deeply connected with the history and development of cinema. The latter is a prerequisite to a better understanding of how subtitling has also developed in AVT. Thus, as it is practised today, subtitling is a result of different changes that have taken place in the field of cinema and technology throughout the years.

According to Marleau (1982: 272), everything started with the use of intertitles in 1903 when Edwin S. Porter inserted some brief explicative texts between the frames of the film *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to facilitate the comprehension of actions. However, it was J. Stuart Blackton who, in 1910, was the first to use subtitles

to summarise the film dialogue. Despite research (see Monaco 1981: 49-118; Van Leeuwen 1999: 166-167) in recording sound in films, the cinema continued to use both intertitles and subtitles up to 1927 when the last version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was directed by Harry A. Pollard. The titles were photographed cardboard signs. They were cut into the film itself so that they could fill the entire screen.

During the period of silent films, filmmakers had to make a choice between two methods of subtitling. They could either interrupt a scene in order to insert one or two lines of dialogue or present a scene by means of one or two explicative sentences. In the first case, the method was referred to as dialogue subtitles. In the second case, it was called explicative or continuity subtitles. Some filmmakers used both methods while others preferred to use one single method in their films. For instance, Griffith preferred the explicative subtitle to the dialogue subtitle while Ince preferred the latter to the former (Marleau 1982: 272).

When sound films began to be produced in the late 1920s, film producers had to face the crucial problem of internationalisation of films. A good number of solutions were proposed to overcome language barriers and help films cross borders. For example, American film industries tried to solve the problem by producing the same film in various language versions. However, this was not profitable because of the poor artistic quality of the films so produced (for further details, see Szarkowska 2005). Fifty years later, with the development of subtitling software by the United States of America (USA), the United Kingdom (UK) and France, subtitling and captioning began to be used regularly on television (Neves 2007: 254). On this point, the key question is: what is subtitling and how does it differ from captioning?

2.2 Definition of the term 'subtitling'

Different scholars in AVT have defined the term 'subtitling' in different ways. Three definitions are recorded here for consideration. The first one comes from Marleau (1982: 273):

Le mot « sous-titrage » désigne dans un film parlant étranger présenté en version originale, la traduction condensée du dialogue projetée au bas des images. Le sous-titrage consiste à traduire aussi fidèlement que possible un dialogue de film exprimé dans une langue plus ou moins ignorée du public. La traduction s'effectue au moyen d'une brève apparition à l'écran d'une inscription lumineuse rédigée dans la langue réceptrice.

[The term "subtitling" designates, in a foreign language film presented in an original version, the condensed translation of a dialogue projected at the bottom of the screen. Subtitling consists in translating as faithfully as possible film dialogue expressed in a language more or less ignored from the public. The translation is done by displaying on the screen and on a translucent band a text written in the receptor language.]

The second one is from Szarkowska (2005):

... subtitling, i.e. supplying a translation of the spoken source language dialogue into the target language in the form of synchronized captions, usually at the bottom of the screen, is the form that alters the source text to the least possible extent and enables the target audience to experience the foreign and be aware of its 'foreignness' at all times.

The last one is articulated by Gottlieb (no date: 14; see also Gottlieb 2004: 86) in these terms:

In the context of translation, and expressed in general and rather technical terms, subtitling consists in the rendering in a different language of verbal messages in filmic media, in the shape of one or more lines of written text, presented on the screen in sync with the original verbal message.

As may be noticed, an underlying feature common to these three definitions is the recognition that subtitling is the translation of film dialogue from the source language (SL) into the target language (TL). This translation is, however, condensed, faithful, constrained in Tifford's (1982) sense, and synchronised with the original spoken text. Based on these observations, an attempt can be made to define the term 'subtitling' as follows:

Subtitling is the rendering of the pragmatic meaning of an SL oral text into a TL written text projected on the screen in line with TL expectancy norms and in sync with the original verbal message of a foreign film.

This definition may not be complete but it indicates a pragmatic approach (Emery 2004) to the translation of film dialogue. This pragmatic approach suggests that subtitlers translate what is meant from what is said and that because of time and space constraints they focus only on what is relevant (Bogucki 2004; Gutt 1991, 2000; Kovačič 1994). It has been adopted and developed into a multimodal pragmatic approach (MPA) by Mubenga (2009). Thus, subtitling differs from captioning which is a simple rendering of the text within the same language.

2.3 Different types of subtitling

The distinction between subtitling and captioning implies that subtitling can be categorised into different types which are well-documented in the literature. A good summary of these different types of subtitling is provided by Bartoll (2004). However, for the present purpose, Gottlieb's (1992: 163-164) proposal has been adopted since it is commonly used in AVT research and based on two objective parameters: (1) linguistic and (2) technical.

Concerning the linguistic parameter, a distinction is made between intralingual subtitling and interlingual subtitling. The latter is a type of translation that occurs between two languages. It is diagonal, that is, going from SL speech to TL writing and is chiefly used in countries where dubbing is not predominant. The former is a type of translation that occurs within one language. It is vertical, that is, going from SL speech to SL writing and is used domestically both for the deaf

and hard-of-hearing viewers and for language learning purposes. Further information on the distinction between intralingual and interlingual subtitling can be found in De Linde and Kay (1999: 1), Neves (2007: 254) and Wurm (2007).

Regarding the technical parameter, a distinction is often made between open subtitles and closed subtitles. The latter are mainly related to intralingual subtitling. They are optionally added to domestic and satellite channels in view of helping different language communities to receive the relevant subtitled versions of the television (TV) programmes at the same time. The former are directly connected with interlingual subtitling. They are incorporated into the original versions of films and TV programmes and thus inseparable from the image. Further details on the distinction between open and closed subtitles can be found in Araújo (2004: 200), De Linde and Kay (1999: 8) and Dries (1995: 26).

However, it should be noted that the linguistic and technical parameters have been expanded by Bartoll (2004: 55-58) so that they can include the different types of subtitles that are currently in use. In this respect, the linguistic parameter comprises the factors of language and purpose. The technical parameter consists of the factors of placing, filing, localisation, mobility, optionality, time, colour, the channel and the product to be subtitled. Both the linguistic and the technical parameters share one common factor, that is, addressee.

The discussion of all these factors is beyond the scope of this paper. The important point is that linguistic and technical parameters are referred to as primary parameters whereas the factors that compose them are called secondary parameters. Primary and secondary parameters combine to produce interlingual and intralingual subtitles. Further details on this combination are provided by Bartoll (2004: 59).

3. Current issues in subtitling

In 1996, while proposing some key elements for the analysis and classification of translation in general, Hurtado Albir (1996: 374) commented on film translation as follows:

...la traduction cinématographique n'est pas une unité statique, car on traduit des classiques de la littérature, des feuilletons télévisés, des spots publicitaires, des dessins animés, des documentaires...

[...film translation is not a static unit, for we translate literary classics, television serials, commercials, cartoons, documentaries...]

The implication of the above statement is that the translation of each genre or text type brings with it a good number of problems that subtitlers usually face during their task and that may have a serious impact on the viewers if they are not solved. These problems may be aesthetic, cultural, educational, linguistic and technical. Because of time and space allotted to this paper, attention is given to the cultural, educational and linguistic issues.

3.1 Linguistic issues

The translation of film dialogue is a difficult task for subtitlers since they have to transfer the spoken discourse to the written text and at the same time translate from the SL to the TL. During these transfer operations, there may be loss of information in so far as subtitlers are obliged to alter or modify a certain quantity of language signs. That is, they have to make some changes in the linguistic structures that are transmitted to the viewer because of the contextual or technical constraints of time and space.

In this respect, Nir (1984: 84) has observed that in some cases the written message may be distorted because it cannot convey all the subtleties of the spoken language such as repetitions, hesitation phenomena, false starts and verbal fillers. Subtitlers will even face more difficulties if they have to translate an audiovisual text containing idioms, colloquial expressions, puns and speech acts which, in general, vary from one language to another and from one culture to another as discussed earlier by Wierzbicka (1985). A good account of some problems that arise on the translation of speech acts is provided by Hervey (1998).

Other linguistic issues are related to the translation of accents, dialects, slang and swear words in the audiovisual text. Subtitlers will encounter translation problems if the actors in the original text use several languages or switch from one language to another. They will face more problems if, depending on such sociolinguistic variables as age, gender, sex, education, occupation, rank and status, the protagonists use different levels of language ranging from formal to informal and from standard through non-standard to substandard. The reader is referred to Gottlieb (2001), Nir (1984), Reid (1991) and Rosa (2001) for further details on the problems that subtitlers face at the linguistic level.

3.2 Educational issues

Subtitler training is a major educational issue in Africa due to a lack of AVT specialists in most African universities. Even in those universities which organise subtitler training, rare are those academics with a PhD in subtitling. The situation is quite similar to the one that Zabalbeascoa et al. (2001: 107) describe in the following terms:

Training and experience varies considerably from one translator to the next; a few have received formal academic training, but most are self-taught. They usually have experience in translating written texts before starting to work with audiovisual texts. Some are specialised in screen translating, others work in a variety of areas.

Since AVT is a brand new experience, African universities which organise translation courses or have a translation department do not have a degree programme for subtitling. However, owing to a bulk of African and foreign films on the market, there is a high demand for subtitlers with a Bachelor of Arts (BA) or a higher degree in subtitling. Each country must strive to have its own subtitlers who can translate the dialogue

of foreign films into the official and national languages so that everyone can enjoy the films in the language of their choice.

A crucial educational issue is the use of subtitling as an innovative strategy for teaching second or foreign languages. Since Africa is a multilingual continent *par excellence*, subtitling can be a panacea for solving problems in foreign language classes. Language teachers can show films and soap operas with subtitles in the foreign or second language. In this respect, there is a need for training teachers in subtitling techniques. This will allow them not only to use subtitling as a teaching strategy but also to design and develop subtitled audiovisual materials which can be used in the language classes. Further details on the value of subtitling as an educational tool or a medium for language learning are provided by Danan (2004), Gottlieb (2004: 87), Neves (2004) and Williams and Thorne (2000).

3.3 Cultural issues

Problems generally occur in film subtitling when the source culture (SC) is different from the target culture (TC) in terms of, for example, body language, gestures and other visual objects. In the latter case, it may be argued in line with Wehn (2001: 71) that simple things such as cows, bicycles and colours clearly show that “the denotational and connotational meanings of symbols differ from each other across cultures.” These cultural differences often lead subtitlers to make visual transformations either by transferring the visual information to the auditory channel or by deleting the visuals from the film or the television serial. This deletion may take place especially if the visuals are considered as obscenities or taboos for the TC. In some extreme cases, it is possible to have the same film shot in different versions so as not to offend the viewers (see e.g. Wehn 2001: 66-67).

In translating aspects of culture (Katan 2004) in the film, subtitlers will often encounter problems from an ideological and a material point of view. From an ideological point of view, they have to single out values, beliefs, behaviour, identity, strategies and both social and power relations that emerge in the source text (ST) and may have an impact on the target text (TT). They also have to consider “the underlying patterns of a culture and subculture” (Halliday 1978: 68) which, in AVT, act through such factors as the audiovisual mode, the products, the human agents, and the target recipients identified by Karamitroglou (2000, 2001).

From a material point of view, subtitlers have to focus on such factors as physical sites, built environment, institutional systems, cultural references, dress, food and drinks that occur in the film frames and may have some influence on the TT (Delabastita 1989: 208; Díaz Cintas 1998: 262). The analysis of such cultural elements assists in discovering linguistic and non-linguistic factors that may motivate the translation shifts (Pettit 2004: 31-34; Tomaszewicz 2001). Thus, subtitlers should know or be sensitive to both cultures in order to do their job well. They should develop their cultural competence which will allow them to understand the cultural elements in the films before

proceeding to the translation of film dialogue proper. This brief survey of the different linguistic, educational and cultural issues involved in subtitling lead me to single out some possible areas of research in the African context.

4. Possible areas of research in subtitling in Africa

It should be pointed out from the onset that research in subtitling in the African context is still at an embryonic stage for various reasons. The main reason for this is that subtitling is a new discipline and that there are very few researchers who are interested in the field. Another reason is due to economic constraints. Subtitling software is expensive and thus not a priority for most African countries that already have multiple socioeconomic problems to solve. The last reason is related to technological constraints. African universities in general do not provide appropriate setups for practice in subtitling. However, based on the different issues discussed in section 3, it is possible to single out five areas of research that may be of interest to students and researchers in Africa.

4.1 Subtitling and translation studies

The relationship between subtitling and translation studies constitutes the most important area of research. In this respect, different approaches that have been developed in translation theory (see e.g. Munday 2001; Newmark 1981) and applied to literary translation can also be extended to interlingual subtitling. Researchers can undertake studies “that combine the linguistic dimension with feminist, post-colonial, gender or power and culture perspectives” (Díaz Cintas 2004: 63). In the same vein, they can carry out equally challenging studies that analyse register, transitivity patterns, mood and modality patterns, thematic patterns and patterns of cohesion from a systemic functional perspective (Halliday 2004, Mubenga 2014). Finally, they can investigate both norms and strategies in subtitling (Mubenga 2010a), adopt an integrated approach to the study of cohesion and coherence (Mubenga 2010b), develop subtitler training programmes (Kruger 2005; Kruger and Kruger 2004) or write a historiography of subtitling in Africa (Kruger and Kruger 2001).

4.2 Subtitling and contrastive linguistic studies

Another important area of research that is productive and largely unexplored is that which links subtitling and contrastive linguistic studies. Researchers can adopt a bottom-up approach used by Baker (1992) and Rojo (2009) and investigate the main translation problems that occur at the different levels of linguistic analysis. Depending on the languages in the film, they can study, for example, the difficulties that arise in the translation of collocations and idioms, the grammatical categories of gender, number, person, tense, aspect and voice, and the relationship between the form and function of speech acts in the SL and TL. Research in this direction has been conducted by Mubenga (2008, 2015).

4.3 Subtitling and multilingualism

The third area of research that is also worth exploring is that which connects subtitling with multilingualism and, by extension, with sociolinguistics. Africa is a multilingual continent and subtitling can contribute greatly to developing languages at the national, regional and continental levels. This explains why subtitling is favoured in South Africa and seen as a factor contributing to the development of indigenous languages that were neglected during the apartheid regime (Kruger et al. 2007). Researchers can investigate whether the "continuous use of a language in one conversation, code (language or variety) switching within one and the same conversation, and code mixing within the same syntactic unit or sentence" (Schmied 1991: 31) have an impact on the translation and subtitling of film dialogue, or not. Likewise, they can study the impact of sociolinguistic variables such as age, sex, gender, social class, and social status on the translation and subtitling of film dialogue. Finally, they can investigate the problems which arise in the translation and subtitling of politeness strategies (Atanga Anyele 2007) or in the protection and recognition of language rights in interlingual subtitling (Olivier 2003).

4.4 Subtitling and foreign language teaching

The fourth area of research focuses on the relevance of subtitling to foreign language teaching and, by extension, to second language acquisition. Foreign language teachers have used films as visual aids since the audiovisual method was in vogue in the sixties (Guberina 1964). However, subtitling has been the missing element and its advent was most welcome by language teachers who wanted to experiment with new techniques (Vanderplank 1988). In Africa, research on the use of subtitling as a strategy for teaching and learning foreign languages is underdeveloped. It is thus suggested that studies must be undertaken to investigate the application of subtitling to the teaching and learning of grammar or the teaching and learning of vocabulary. Likewise, studies may be undertaken to investigate the effect of subtitling on the acquisition of reading and writing skills. Finally, researchers with a background in materials development can attempt to design and develop activities to teach reading and writing through subtitling. This point leads us to the last area of research in the following section.

4.5 Subtitling and literacy

The last area of research centres on how subtitling can be used to fight illiteracy and to improve the standards of literacy in Africa. Studies in this direction are burgeoning in different parts of Africa. Mention can be made of, for example, Ayonghe Lum (2010) and Kruger and Rafapa (2002). However, there is still more to be done in this area. Research can be carried out to see whether intralingual subtitling facilitates literacy development at the early stage of language learning, or not. Likewise, research can be conducted to see whether learning to read through intralingual subtitling produces skills that are transferable to any other

language, or not. Finally, studies can be undertaken to analyse the effect of intralingual subtitling on reading speed in adult and young learners.

At this stage, it should be argued that the different points mentioned in the five areas of research above are just the tip of the iceberg. Other relevant points to be considered for research are, for example, studies on the subtitling of children's programmes, humour, irony, taboo words and expressions, or corpus-based studies on the syntax of subtitles. The reader is referred to, for instance, Chaume Varela (2002), Díaz Cintas (2004), Gambier (2009), Pelsmaekers and Van Besien (2002), and Tirkkonen-Condit and Mäkisalo (2008) for further details on these points. However, it is important to say that not many people are interested in doing research in subtitling in Africa. This lack of interest is basically due to the peripheral status of subtitling in TS, the polysemiotic nature of films and other TV programmes, and the non-commercialisation of subtitles on the market (Díaz Cintas 2004: 50-52).

These difficulties can be surmounted only if subtitling is recognised as translation and research genre in its own right and given its rightful place in TS in Africa. This suggests that subtitling like other AVT modalities should be incorporated into translation programmes at the university level and not taught sporadically as is the case now. This will give students more options to choose from in TS. Since films are polysemiotic texts, students and researchers should adopt a semiotically-driven approach to the analysis, translation and subtitling of film discourse as proposed earlier by, for example, Chuang (2006), Mubenga (2009), Remael (2001) and Taylor (2003). Finally, students and researchers should understand beforehand that "[s]ubtitles of foreign films are never commercialised and [that] the transcription from screen is necessary" (Díaz Cintas 2004: 51). Instead of criticising the subtitles which are texts in their own right, they should comprehend that "[t]he study of the discrepancies between the translation supplied by the translator and the adjusted subtitles is an area of research which could shed light on the power struggles taking place during the decision-making process" (Díaz Cintas 2004: 52).

5 Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have been mainly concerned with discussing the different issues which are involved in subtitling and the five areas in which research in subtitling can be undertaken in the African context. Different topics, though not exhaustive, have been suggested. Students and researchers in translation are invited to identify a topic that is relevant to their interests and plan to do their research. This will contribute greatly to the advancement of film subtitling as a new research genre in TS in Africa.

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