

## Film Translation: Dubbing and Subtitling

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Film translation, a specialized form of translation, is often regarded as peripheral to translation and not too important. Scant attention is paid to it in writings on translation and translation theory. If mention is ever made, it is only done in passing and with a mere comment or two. It is understandable therefore why there is hardly any systematic research on the subject. However, from the point of view of interlingual communication, which is one of the basic reasons for the existence of translation, film translating probably surpasses book translation in total impact. Translated films through regular distribution in the cinema or on television reach a larger audience than any other form of translation.

In this paper I propose to examine two current forms of film translating, dubbing and subtitling, compare them with one another, and come up with some tentative conclusions. Though frequently encountered, these two modes of translation are rarely discussed and hardly ever taught in courses on translation.

Basically, film translation is undertaken to make a film accessible to those who do not understand the language that is spoken in it, that is to overcome a linguistic barrier, just as a book or any written matter is translated to make it accessible to those who do not understand the language in which it is written. The translation of film depends on a number of factors which share a common characteristic and that is they are not determined by the production of the film but its distribution in a linguistic area different from the one in which it was made. These factors are to a large extent national in character. The legislation of a country may lay down that all imported films have to be dubbed (as in Italy). The size of the linguistic area, a tradition of film translation (as in the Federal Republic of Germany and France where foreign films are invariably dubbed) and the volume of national film production determine the extent of dubbing and subtitling carried out. Commercial factors also play a substantial part in film distribution.

Subtitling, a comparatively popular mode of film translation, is a fairly straightforward procedure which costs relatively little time and money. Briefly, it amounts to this: a printed translation of the film dialogue or 'title' is projected simultaneously near the bottom of the screen. Subtitling necessarily involves abbreviating the film text since the human eye is only capable of perceiving a limited number of letters and signs (including punctuation marks and spaces) during a given period of time, and because the audience or television viewer is intended to forget that he/she is reading. This means the dialogue can rarely be translated without being shortened. It is in this process of condensation that the art of subtitling lies. The translation is carried out under certain physical constraints.

- the subtitler is allowed only so many characters per foot of film,
- the viewer should be able to read and understand the title rapidly;

- the title should not be on screen long enough for it to be read several times;
- where a speech has to be split over several titles, the breaks should fall at natural points, and
- the beginning and end of title should synchronize with the beginning and end of speech in the film

Three problems arise as a result of these constraints of subtitling. The subtitler has to be a master of precis while still producing acceptable language. In theory, since subtitling is a written mode, the translator has latitude to overcome some cultural problems but, in practice, there are severe restrictions because of the cultural constraints. For example, the use of four-letter words, which varies widely from one country to another, is in western countries limited to film translation. Finally, the fact that subtitling *is* written creates an insidious problem of shift of medium which often has adverse effects on the end product. The subtitler works very much in the written mode. This is a constraint which, together with the constraint of space, tends to shift spoken language towards written language with a greater degree of formality and stiffness. This is noticeable only if the titles are read independently of the film.

Dubbing, on the other hand, is a specific technique of translation which is, in the words of Nida (1964:178) 'difficult and complicated'. It is the replacement of one language with another in live sound, the actors and actresses record a translation of the dialogue on a new soundtrack. The translation is styled and pronounced in such a way that the oral movements as perceived on the screen coincide as closely as possible with the movements made by the dubbing actor's lips. Besides this synchrony of the lips there is also the synchrony with facial expressions and gestures to consider. The strict observation of synchrony as the overruling requirement automatically implies a translation which is less than faithful to the original. To obtain what is known as a 'synch' or perfect synchronisation, formal adaptations without destroying the meaningful content are sometimes resorted to for the sake of a very close parallelism of lip movements and the timing of stressed syllable etc. According to Caillé, the French dubbing specialist, 'l'Amérique du Sud' in a French film was once translated into English as 'in Mexico'.

It is thus apparent that the dubber is faced with a collection of seemingly impossible tasks. Characteristic differences in word order in different languages have to be taken into account, for example, the placing of an adjective before a noun in English and after it in French/Malay and the habit of the German/Japanese verb to find its way to the end of a sentence. Likewise there are great differences in lip movements and sound between the following: 'love' (English), 'amour' (French) and 'asmara/cinta' (Malay); or between 'die' (English), 'mourir' (French) and 'mati'/meninggal dunia' (Malay). Some languages are also more concise than others, for example, Chinese. The dubbing writer is also faced with other problems such as whether to retain the foreign flavour of the original with the actors affecting accent and using foreign expressions or to create the illusion that the script was originally in the dubbed language.

That dubbing is difficult and costly cannot be denied. Many a writer and translator share this view. Ian Finlay in *Translating* (1971:82) says it is a 'far

more challenging, difficult and expensive method' than subtitling. Caillé (1960) thought that dubbing 'apart from being absolutely necessary is also one of the most exciting and, if properly done, most rewarding forms of translation, comparable with the translation of poetry'. It is indeed, hence the well-dubbed film is a rarity. This is one argument against dubbing that turns up quite regularly.

Arguments for and against both dubbing and subtitling in fact abound. Caillé believed subtitles do not give complete satisfaction because it takes too long to read them. Others are of the opinion that they are tiring and distract the attention from the image. Also, subtitles are altogether useless to people who cannot read at all (it is estimated that there are over a thousand million illiterates in the world). Malaysia is known to have a high literacy rate among the Third World countries, yet what percentage of the Malaysian television viewers or cinema audience find the subtitles useful, or even read them, merits investigation. Those in favour of subtitling, however, think it has two advantages over dubbing besides the question of economy. Subtitles can comment upon or explain unusual situations, puns, unfamiliar notions and the like. The nature of dubbing rules out explicit comment and the lack of time makes it impossible to insert implicit comment in the text. Subtitling can be omitted when fragments of the dialogue are either superfluous or incomprehensible, whereas dubbing would still be required. In fact, chunks of dialogues are frequently left out in our local television programme subtitles. Films or parts of films which are action-packed usually carry no subtitles because they are superfluous. The audience is still able to follow the story/film as evidenced by many a Chinese youngster enjoying the Hindi/Tamil films shown on the local television screen either by the private television network Channel 3 or Television Malaysia. Subtitling has in fact been sometimes termed the hybrid way of translating - *the spoken text* (being subsidiary can be shortened with less consequence than in the case of a written text) *remains intact* but is accompanied by a printed translation near the bottom of the screen. The audience hears the original dialogue, understands it completely, partially or not at all and sees the translation, simultaneously with the images.

Dubbing, on the other hand, can lead to linguistic chauvinism if it becomes a tradition in a country — the audience is unaccustomed to foreign sounds because it never hears any and therefore prefers to have the films dubbed. And so the vicious circle goes on. Another danger of dubbing is what might be called the 'radio-play' effect, when a large number of foreign language films is imported (and this is necessary for a thriving dubbing industry) the number of available actors and actresses may very well be smaller than the number of roles to be dubbed. The result is that one hears certain voices too often, the more so if, for reasons of economy, an actor takes on more than one role.

Dubbing and subtitling seem to have found different degrees of favour and acceptance in different countries. Generally speaking, subtitles are definitely more popular in English-speaking countries, while dubbing seems more popular in non-English speaking countries particularly in France and Germany or even Italy. Sometimes the use of one and not the other depends on where the film is shown, whether on the 'silver screen', that is, the cinema or on the television screen. This is of course determined to a large extent also



by national policy. In France all television programmes have to be in French. Hence all imported films on television are dubbed and not subtitled. But in the cinemas they are either subtitled or dubbed. Occasionally, films are even shown in their original version, that is, with the original soundtrack. France has a quota system for the importation of foreign films. Japan has no quota on foreign film imports but, all the same, all television networks have their films or programmes dubbed in Japanese so that they reach the audience they are intended for. However viewers who wish to listen to the dialogue in the language in which the film was made can do so with the help of special ear-phones which they can plug into the television set for that purpose. The set-up then becomes some sort of a simultaneous interpretation. In the Japanese cinemas, however, subtitling is the general rule.

Malaysia has no protectionist policy which imposes a quota on the number of foreign films that can be imported. However, 60%-70% of Television Malaysia programmes (both local and imported put together) are expected to be in Bahasa Malaysia. In a week, Television Malaysia (Channels One and Two) devotes 48 hours of its air-time to the showing of imported films which are 100% subtitled. This means that approximately 65% of Television Malaysia programmes carry subtitles. This figure is exclusive of taped programmes (that is, video tapes) which are not subtitled because of the problem of getting the scripts. Cartoons, too, are not subtitled for very obvious reasons — generally they are self-explanatory and also because of manpower constraints. Dubbing in Television Malaysia comes under a different unit which does not have any in-house or permanent translators. Hence only four weekly programmes of Television Malaysia are dubbed, namely:

- 1 Moby Dick
- 2 Ultra Man
- 3 Documentaries from NHK - Japanese Broadcasting Corporation
- 4 Camera on the Move - a Western commentary

There was a suggestion recently by the Minister of Information, Datuk Rais Yatim, to dub all Television Malaysia programmes into Bahasa Malaysia. Comments in the media, however, indicated that many were not in favour of the move and the idea was finally abandoned. The argument was that with dubbing, authenticity disappears. A survey was conducted in the Netherlands in 1974 by the Netherlands Broadcasting Foundation (the umbrella organisation providing the technical services for all Dutch broadcasting organisations) on public opinion in the Netherlands on the issue of subtitles versus dubbing. The reason given by two-thirds (65%) of the random sample of 359 viewers of 15 years and above, as to why they prefer subtitling was that it is more authentic. As in many other countries, films shown in the Malaysian cinemas are generally subtitled (the translation being done by part-timers, qualified or otherwise).

At this juncture it is pertinent, perhaps, to touch a little upon the question of quality and acceptability of the finished product. Dubbing and subtitling share with written translation a number of constraints which limit the quality and acceptability of the finished product. Dubbers and subtitlers often work under heavy pressure of the time constraint, either to meet a programme

schedule, as in television, or 'first night' or 'opening night' schedule in the cinema. As such, the very nature of dubbing (which is time-consuming and expensive) makes it an unsuitable technique for the film industry, while the quality of the subtitles may leave a great deal to be desired. If quantity is the target, quality has to be sacrificed. This perhaps explains some of the hilarious or meaningless subtitles we get on the local television circuit. To quote just a few

- He'll come to fetch you in a *Rose Ross* (obviously the reference here is to a *Rolls Royce* which any translator with an adequate general educational background would have guessed, even if he had failed to hear the words actually spoken or was not provided with the script);
- *Marco Pontin* in Hongkong. Let's book some tickets for her show. (The dialogue was actually accompanying a scene showing the poster of a ballerina who is supposed to be *Margot Fonteyn*, but perhaps the picture was too blurred)

Then there was the television series based on the book *Roots*. The translator when doing the subtitling failed to check the exact spelling of the name of one of the characters in the story (He should in fact have read the book first before undertaking to do the translation). Instead, he took the easy way out and spelt it as it sounded following the Malay phonological system, much to his chagrin, of course, because he was criticised for it in the written media almost immediately

Having examined dubbing and subtitling and the problems that accompany them, what conclusions can we draw or come up with as regards these two widely manifested forms of film translation? Simply this, that dubbing and subtitling by virtue of their importance and apparent necessity to one of the modern forms of art, that is, film production, can no longer be left to a vague existence. Rather, as two very specialized modes of translation they should be given their due share of attention. People should realise that time is an important factor in the creation of quality dubbing or subtitling. And last but not least, film translating should be included in any course programmes on translation

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