

'Speak my language': current attitudes to television subtitling and dubbing

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Language has always played a key role in the way we understand ourselves and our society. For this reason it is no surprise that issues relating to language should often have prompted such fierce controversy. Part of the explanation for our linguistic sensitivity is that language is closely bound up with our sense of belonging to a particular group or nation. Any attempt to control the ways in which we use our native tongue can therefore be viewed as an attack upon our personal or national identity and we respond accordingly. It follows that language is not just a vehicle which allows communication between individuals and nations to take place, it can also be regarded as an instrument of social control; witness the many instances in history where imperialist aspirations — whether military or economic — have gone hand in hand with the imposition of one language at the expense of another. By suppressing a nation's indigenous tongue, the calculation has been that one could gradually stamp out any residual national resistance and encourage compliance. In the eighteenth century in Scotland, for instance, speaking — or singing — in the Gaelic language was expressly forbidden, while in this century, in Franco's Spain, the Catalan language was likewise rigorously suppressed.

It is in the light of these considerations that we should regard the phrase 'Speak my language' not just as a polite request that you switch to a form of communication which another person understands, but also as a command or even threat which may allow the person little option but to comply ('Speak *my* language!'). Viewed in this light language becomes one of the means by which certain forms of media imperialism can be practised. In this respect, the now widely accepted status which English enjoys as an international media language is seen by many as something of a mixed blessing, since it

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not only erodes the status of minority languages, but also brings with it an additional cultural threat, variously perceived as the chimera of 'global America' or 'wall-to-wall Dallas'.

Language is fortunately not just used as an imperialist instrument. It is the medium which gives us insights into diverse other cultures, as well as allowing individuals from different nations to exchange and absorb ideas, information and experiences. Because there is such a wide multiplicity of different tongues, however, language can also often be as much a barrier as it is a key to understanding. To overcome these barriers, most of us (the exceptions are the talented polyglots) are going to depend upon the services of some agent or intermediary, who will translate the foreign material into a form we understand, whether this be in speech, writing or some other graphic form. For centuries translators and interpreters have toiled away, bridging this particular communication gap. Now, however, in the age of the mass media, we have become accustomed to a much more intense international exchange, as a wide variety of artefacts — film, television and video products — are traded on the media markets of the world. This in turn has given rise to a new set of problems — namely, what conversion method is best suited to transpose the language of the source programme into a form the target audience will readily understand. Before the advent of talking pictures the problem of what we shall from now on refer to as 'language transfer' posed no real problems. For as long as movies were silent and the dialogue and other narrative information was conveyed primarily through intertitles, it was a comparatively straightforward task to translate them into the language of the target audience. As soon as on-screen characters began to talk, however, the question of language difference was quickly discovered to be a problem which admitted of no such simple solution.

The different modes of language transfer

One of the earliest strategies which film makers employed to overcome the language barrier was to produce multi-language versions of the same film. During this period actors who could demonstrate proficiency in more than one language were in great demand. For various reasons, not the least important of which was cost, this form of conversion was gradually abandoned, to be superseded by the modes which are now currently practised. These modes — in no particular order of priority — are (a) dubbing, (b) subtitling and (c) the various forms of voice-over, commentary and narration. *Dubbing* involves replacing all, or at least the majority of source language utterances on the original sound track with speech and dialogue in the target language. In the process particular attention will be paid to the synchronization of lip movements in order to create the illusion

for the viewer that the words emanating from the loudspeaker 'belong' to the respective on-screen characters. With *subtitling* the original sound track is preserved and a written version provided in the form of a series of titles which keep the viewer informed about what the person in question is saying. One of the particular skills of subtitling has always been to calculate by how much you can reduce the information given in the original speech or dialogue in order that the viewing of a subtitled programme does not fall too far out of line with 'normal' TV watching. As far as *voice-over*, *commentary* and *narration* are concerned, what these methods all have in common is that they introduce an additional or substitute native-language voice (or voices) either to give a simultaneous translation of the original or to provide the target audience with some form of explanatory commentary on the story being told or the action being screened.

When it comes to assessing the effectiveness of each of these language transfer methods, there is a considerable divergence of opinion as to their relative merits. Particularly strong views are held, for instance, about the purported shortcomings of dubbing, to the extent that in some quarters it is regarded as a wholly contemptible practice. For those who take the contrary view, subtitling is regarded with almost equal disdain, since it allegedly makes unwarranted demands on the traditional TV audience's powers of concentration and also draws the viewers' attention away from the visual action which some see as being at the centre of the television experience.

While it is undoubtedly true that 'views on language conversion . . . are strongly polarised' (Luyken, 1987a: 30), it is equally true that many in broadcasting accept that particular conversion methods are more suited to certain genres or programme types than others. With documentaries, for instance, it could be contended that the subtitling and voice-over or narration modes might be preferable, since the presence of the original soundtrack acts as a form of guarantee of authenticity. By the same token, for an action thriller with comparatively little dialogue dubbing might be preferred on the grounds that having to deploy one's reading skills could possibly detract from the pleasures of involvement in fast-moving action scenes.

One factor which has had a major bearing on what language conversion method is employed is the national or geographical area for which the programme is destined. In Europe, for instance, individual countries have developed markedly different traditions in this respect, with the result that audiences have come to expect that foreign language material will be presented in the nationally dominant mode. Broadly speaking, the larger and more economically powerful the country, the more likely it is that dubbing will have assumed a position of dominance. In France, Italy and Germany, for instance, dubbing is the established mode, while in Belgium, the Netherlands and Scandinavia almost all incoming material will be

subtitled. Size is by no means the only factor, however, and in those smaller countries which lay claim to the status of being 'nations without states' such as Wales and Catalonia, the dubbing of foreign language programmes (into Welsh or Catalan) is one way of ensuring that due emphasis is given to the respective national language. *Hearing* your own language spoken not only provides confirmation of its importance and relevance in an increasingly homogenized world, it is arguably a more potent way of reinforcing a sense of national identity or autonomy than reading the subtitled text. (The spoken word is seen as being closer to the 'living heart' of the language, whereas writing requires more of an intellectual decoding operation.)

Having begun to consider some of the more general factors which influence attitudes to language conversion methods, I shall now take each of the most practised techniques in turn and examine its perceived strengths and shortcomings. Let me start with dubbing since it is the practice which tends to call forth the strongest reactions.

Dubbing

Over the years dubbing has had a relatively bad press, though it should be pointed out that the most negative responses are encountered in those countries where other modes, especially subtitling, have become the accepted norm. By contrast, where audiences have been brought up on a diet of dubbed material over a long period of time, they will tend to be more tolerant of or even overlook the minor inconsistencies which are inevitable with this method.

In attempting to establish a possible correlation between audience response and the standards of synchronization, it is worth drawing attention to the fact that where dubbing has been most regularly practised extremely high standards of lip synchronization have been attained and a thriving dubbing industry has been established (Barcelona has no fewer than seventy-five dubbing studios!). These achievements are partly the result of the constantly high demand for dubbing, which has allowed practitioners to develop sophisticated techniques for dealing with a wide range of film and television material. And just as in other industrial sectors there are advantages associated with the scale of the operation, so too with dubbing benefits accrue from the sheer volume of material which has to be processed. This has, for instance, meant that certain studios have been able to develop specialized skills in the dubbing of particular types of programming. A further advantage which dubbing countries enjoy is that studios generally have access to a much larger pool of actors conversant with the requirements of dubbing than is the case in countries where other modes predominate.

As in other areas of human endeavour, so with dubbing the art is to hide the art. Or in the words of one dubbing practitioner:

The ideal end-product would be the perfect illusion. The best possible response from the audience would be for them never to be aware that we had done anything at all. Dubbing, after all, is the art of being totally inconspicuous. (Bakewell, 1987: 16)

The problems associated with achieving this harmonization are not inconsiderable, however, and success will depend on a number of factors including compatibility of source and target language, the budget available to fund what is quite a complex and time-consuming operation, the skill of the translator(s), especially in capturing the appropriate tone and register and, last but not least, the ability of the producer to coax the best possible performance out of his/her team of actors.

The relative lack of compatibility between languages can pose quite serious problems for a dubbing team. Sometimes the difficulty is essentially a linguistic one. As one French practitioner has put it: 'When dubbing a foreign film into French, the problem is often of having to switch from a language containing tonic accents to another totally devoid of them' (Yvane, 1987: 19). A problem of a slightly different order occurs when there is a considerable difference in the type and range of body language associated with source and target language. As one experienced British dubbing expert has commented: 'English sits quite happily on the behaviour of the Germans, the French and the Scandinavians, but the extremes of Latin temperament just don't lend themselves easily to British reticence' (Bakewell, 1987: 16). On these and other occasions the dubbing team will sometimes decide to incorporate additional explanatory information into the translated version in the attempt to cross the cultural divide, though this is often quite difficult to achieve given the time constraints imposed by the length of the original utterance. Just as with other forms of translation, the bigger the cultural gap between the two languages, the greater the challenge for those handling the dubbing operation.

It is not just cultural differences which can pose problems. The genre or the programme category to which the television material belongs can also have a significant impact on the ease with which a dubbed version can be produced. A substantial amount of television programming centres on talking heads and some of the most popular television genres such as series and serial drama also make abundant use of the close-up in order to intensify the sense of audience involvement. As can be readily appreciated, however, by filming the action in this way, the lip movements of the characters assume a high level of visibility and it becomes that much more difficult to achieve satisfactory lip synchronization. Curiously enough then, the benefits of being able to buy in a lot of relatively cheap imported soaps

can sometimes be outweighed by the cost and difficulty of producing an acceptable dubbed version.

The complexities and logistical challenges of the dubbing process inevitably mean that — in contrast to other forms of language transfer — it is a relatively high-cost operation. Costs will of course differ according to the type of material being processed, but it is usually calculated that dubbing a programme will cost between ten and fifteen times as much as producing a subtitled version of the same material. With *Chateaufallon*, for instance, a French drama series screened on Channel 4 in 1987, it was reckoned that between £10,000 and £15,000 was spent on dubbing each hour-long episode, up to twenty times the price of standard subtitling (Brown, 1987). Where a considerable amount of language transfer work is undertaken, as is the case with the Welsh channel S4C, which regularly acquires programmes from outside the UK and converts them by dubbing or revoicing them into Welsh, the costs of language transfer — across a range of programming — are estimated to be £10,000 for dubbing, £2,000 for voice-over and £1,500 for subtitling (Luyken, 1987b).

Subtitling

In the eyes of many observers, the particular merit that subtitling has over other language transfer methods is that it allows the viewer access to the original material without at the same time destroying valuable aspects of that material's authenticity. The claim is that, once you replace the original voices from the programme in question, you detract considerably from the complete and integrated experience which that programme offered. Television policy-makers will sometimes use the 'integrity' argument when justifying the use of subtitling in a particular strand of their programming. Asked to comment on BBC Television's policy on language transfer methods, for instance, Will Wyatt (then Assistant Managing Director Network Television) had this to say on the decision to run BBC2's foreign language films with subtitles:

Our policy recognises that when we buy programmes we are buying the complete performance by actors and not just a visual performance to which a quite different voice may be fitted. In our opinion, dubbing would diminish its integrity. (Letter to author)

The fact that in subtitling the original speech and dialogue remain intact has an additional advantage in that it means that viewers can pick up certain tonal inflections and colouring which — even though they are in a foreign tongue — can still often provide insights into personality, mood or intention. Where the programme has been dubbed, viewers have to take it

that much more on trust that at least some of these 'integral' factors have survived the process of transposition.

While there are indeed many who prefer subtitling on the grounds of its greater authenticity, other viewers would argue that in another sense dubbing is more authentic, since — as already suggested — a dubbed programme comes closer to what they traditionally associate with television viewing, in which the only visual decoding required is that of the moving images. It also goes without saying that subtitling requires a degree of literacy and visual acuity, both of which cannot necessarily be presupposed in all members of the television audience. (Older viewers, in particular, sometimes complain about difficulty in seeing the titles properly.) This has given rise to debate as to how best you can ensure that the speed and quantity of subtitling is adjusted so as not to discourage the slower reading members of the television audience, which is likely to be drawn from a wider cross-section of society than the more self-selecting cinema audience. In some quarters, for example, it has been suggested that an optimum time for having titles up on the television screen is 6 seconds (Minchinton, 1987).

On the related question of the legibility of subtitles, it is gratifying to report that more thought is now being given to this subject than in earlier times when, given the frequency with which white titles tended to coincide with white background, watching a subtitled film in the cinema could be a deeply frustrating experience. Nowadays, on the other hand, much of the subtitling of television material makes use of the 'shadowed script' or 'dark patch' methods whereby white script is superimposed on a darker background, thus making it far easier to read. What one always has to bear in mind, however, is that conditions of reception for television are markedly different from those in the cinema. Sitting in a darkened auditorium in the cinema and with comparatively little to distract one is a very different experience from watching television in one's domestic environment where nothing like the same concentration can be guaranteed and lighting conditions may make the deciphering of subtitles no easy task. It is for these reasons that experiments have been taking place in recent years to see whether, with the aid of different technological aids, the traditional methods of subtitle presentation can be improved. One of the devices presently under consideration, for instance, involves the use of either a square TV screen with a special space reserved for text and subtitles or an additional screen for the display of various kinds of explanatory information. Another possibility being explored is using a moving scroll of text, as opposed to segments of text being held on screen for a set duration. Perhaps the most important of these technological advances, however, is the much more extensive use of the Teletext facility.

While it appears likely that some of these developments will be ruled out on grounds of cost or of potential customer resistance, it is conceivable that

others will have a much greater impact. Teletext, for instance, would appear to open up many new possibilities. In particular, it could allow viewers to choose *whether* they require the aid of subtitles in the first place and in some cases it will give them the further choice of deciding in what language they wish to receive that support. If more use were to be made of the Teletext facility, it would also seem desirable that at least some of the coding systems now used in subtitling for the deaf could be more generally employed. When producing subtitles for the deaf, conventions have been established, for instance, by which the subtitler provides such information on accent and tone of voice as (s)he feels might be necessary for a better understanding of what is being said. Similarly, techniques have been developed — using stenography, palatyping and various machine translation aids — which allow for practically instantaneous subtitles, for use in those programmes, predominantly news, current affairs and sport, where there is little or no time to prepare the titles in advance. (The systems which made use of these techniques in the early 1980s did not inspire much confidence, but a recently developed BBC system called RECAP is, it is claimed, proving somewhat more reliable.)

Commentary, voice-over, narration

Possibly because dubbing and subtitling became so firmly established in the early days as the two preferred alternative modes of language transfer, broadcasters have not always exploited to the full other ways of transposing foreign language material. As more material is exchanged, however, between countries which do not share the same language, so the possibilities are being explored as to what other forms of conversion, especially commentary and voice-over, could be profitably introduced.

Like subtitling, voice-overs and the various forms of commentary have considerable advantages over dubbing in terms of cost. An additional benefit is that they can be used for live transmissions or where there is very little preparation time before the programme is transmitted. This means that they are particularly well suited as a method for the rendering of speeches by foreign politicians. Indeed so used have we become to 'hearing' speeches or statements conveyed in this way that many in the audience would now deem it wholly inappropriate if any other mode were used (in spite of strenuous attempts by the language learning lobby to promote the cause of subtitling!). In the case of live reporting, e.g. of sports events, there are no real problems, in that the voice of the original commentator is simply replaced by a completely new commentary, which can of course also be angled to the perceived needs — or even prejudices — of the new target audience.

A further fundamental difference to dubbing is that, with the voice-over

or narration mode, no attempt is made to (re)create the illusion of lip synchronization. In the case of those contributions from foreign politicians, for example, it is customary to allow the viewer to hear the first one or two sentences at normal volume but then to bring in the voice of the interpreter above that of the speaker, whose words are usually held just beneath the threshold of audibility (again much to the irritation of the foreign language learner!). The voice-over and narration techniques do admit of considerable variation, however. As Hindmarsh and Luyken (1986: 104) have commented: 'The new words and phrases may draw considerably, slightly or not at all on the original script. Within each of these modes there is room for variation in the degree of fidelity to the original wording'.

The fact that commentary and voice-over methods by definition introduce an additional mediating figure is of course not without its consequences for the manner in which the audience feels it is being addressed. If the mediator/narrator seeks to provide too much explanatory information in interpreting what is being said, the audience can quickly become alienated. If, on the other hand, an insufficient attempt is made to bridge the culture gap, viewers may well become increasingly disorientated and bemused.

The attitudes of British broadcasters and audiences

As has been already suggested, attitudes to the various conversion methods differ according to country, region or even the type of audience being addressed. While the existence of national preferences cannot be denied, one must also recognize the importance of diverse other factors in forming those attitudes. One important consideration is the status one's own language enjoys, though as we have seen from the examples of Welsh and Catalan, status is not always related to the number of people who actually speak the language. Another factor in determining attitude is the general esteem in which foreign languages and cultures are held. In Britain, for example, acquiring foreign languages has never been accorded high cultural significance and there is the somewhat arrogant assumption that the majority of life's activities — including broadcasting — can be satisfactorily conducted in English. In many other European countries more enlightened attitudes to foreign languages prevail and there is less of a tendency to equate 'foreignness' with all that is strange, incomprehensible or potentially threatening. In Britain this characteristically insular mind-set has not only affected our readiness to learn foreign languages, it also has had an impact on audiences' response to foreign language material.

The other factor which has had an important determining influence on British attitudes to the question of language transfer is that so much

television material is produced in English that the need to convert a substantial proportion of the transmitted output simply does not arise. The fact that British TV audiences have hitherto not been exposed to much foreign programming has also resulted in the formation of prejudices to this sort of material. For example, one ITV controller of programmes in the South of England had this to say about how the audience in his area responded to subtitled programmes: '... viewers in the South are clearly not much disposed to having to concentrate on small print. The fact is that they don't like foreign language material very much — full stop!' (Letter to author).

Though we have already referred to broad national preferences for particular modes of language conversion, the situation in Britain is by no means as clear cut as in certain other European countries. In one mid-1980s survey, for instance, no fewer than 82 percent of Dutch viewers said they preferred subtitling, whereas when British viewers were consulted 36 percent opted for subtitling and 48 percent for dubbing (Luyken, 1987b: 61). Later surveys commissioned by Channel 4 give slightly different percentages for British viewers' preferences, but the broad picture remains the same. In one 1988 survey, for instance, 51 percent of viewers chose dubbing as their preferred method, and 32 percent subtitling. Asked about their reasons for opting thus, 50 percent of those who preferred dubbing said they did so because 'it was easy to follow' and 38 percent because 'subtitles demand too much concentration'. Among those who preferred subtitling as a method, 42 percent suggested it was because they did not like dubbed programmes, 26 percent because this method was 'easy to follow' and 20 percent because they 'liked hearing the original soundtrack'. As those who have conducted these surveys comment, however, these are average percentage figures, which conceal the fact that within the national television audience there are significant differences in the pattern of preference according to the type of programme being watched and also to age and social class categories.¹

Since individual British channels cater to some extent for different constituencies of viewer, so their respective policies towards language conversion methods also differ quite markedly. In the case of the British ITV companies their declared policy is to transmit all foreign language programming in a dubbed version. The only exception to this has been the occasional late-night transmission of 'art house movies' where subtitles have been used. The general view of those responsible for ITV programming and scheduling is that 'foreign language programming will always be of peripheral interest to the mass audience channels' (Letter to author from Thames Television Deputy Director of Programmes). Thus, when foreign material is shown, it tends to be confined to genres such as police thrillers or western action movies which suit late night transmission. An additional reason for acquiring this sort of material is of course that ITV

operates a quota restriction on American and Commonwealth programming in its schedule and this — as the Deputy Controller of the ITV film purchase group concedes — is 'one of the main motivations behind acquiring EEC products' (Letter to author).

The attitude of Channel 4 towards the question of language transfer is very different from that of the ITV companies, in that they have now opted for a general policy of subtitling all foreign material. This is the policy one might have expected from a channel committed to providing a service to, among others, minority, special interest audiences. As Liz Forgan, Channel 4's former Director of Programmes observes:

On the whole, the foreign programming that we buy consists of material of a quality which would be damaged by dubbing. We consider that the British audience is not used to dubbing and finds it unsatisfactory. The 'art house' audience hate it for serious films, and the 'popular' audience doesn't much go for foreign language material anyway. (Letter to author)

In 1987, in an attempt to learn more about how audiences responded to different language transfer methods, Channel 4 took the unusual step of putting out *Chateaufallon*, the French drama series already referred to, in both a dubbed and a subtitled version. They also set up a concurrent survey to discover more about the audience's response to these alternative presentations. The results of the survey showed that of the people who chose to watch, twice as many opted for the dubbed version as for the subtitled one. Possibly more significant, however, were the fairly wide variations in attitude according to age and class. There was clear evidence, for instance, to suggest that the younger age groups preferred subtitling. Similarly, more 'upmarket' audiences were more likely to have a preference for subtitling. By concentrating on just one programme, however, it was recognized that the results of this survey might well have given a distorted impression of attitudes to a wider range of programming and possibly for this reason the channel deemed the results to be 'inconclusive'. They thus decided to hold firm to their policy of subtitling most foreign material.

As far as Channel 4's Welsh operation S4C is concerned, the policy towards matters of language transfer is radically different from that of the parent body. Given the official status that Welsh now enjoys, one of S4C's legitimizing aims was to provide a service for the special needs of Welsh speakers. Thus, in addition to the eighty hours per week of programming it takes over from the schedule of Channel 4, S4C puts out thirty hours of Welsh language programmes. Approximately one and a half hours of this material is dubbed into Welsh or provided with a voice-over. Subtitling in Welsh has once or twice been attempted with certain types of material (e.g. the occasional season of European films), but — in the words of S4C's

Programme Controller — 'this is an infrequent practice, because the audience is not comfortable with subtitling' (Letter to author). The formation of a Welsh-speaking television channel has clearly led to serious consideration of issues relating to language transfer and also to the development of a small but thriving dubbing industry. This allows one to make the more general point that countries in which, to varying degrees, forms of multilingualism are practised will usually have acquired knowledge about and skills in techniques of language transfer which can form a useful basis for further, more general research and development in the field (see also Hindmarsh and Luyken, 1986: 103).

BBC Television's policy on matters of language transfer is governed by what Will Wyatt refers to as the 'programme-making departments' differing imperatives'. In practice, this means that decisions as to which mode to employ depend on both aesthetic and pragmatic considerations. Aesthetic criteria may, for instance, be paramount in music and arts programmes in which case subtitles would be used. With other types of programming, where only limited time is available before transmission (e.g. news bulletins), a voice-over will be used because it is quicker to arrange. Significantly enough, however, there are some occasions and certain programme formats where a more flexible approach is adopted. With foreign language documentaries, for instance, subtitles are used where there is an eyewitness or on-screen presenter. On the other hand, where there is a foreign language commentary, this is usually replaced with an English version, because, as Wyatt claims, 'it is much easier for viewers to follow' (Letter to author). Slightly different problems are created, according to Wyatt, by programmes of mixed genre such as drama documentaries. He cites the case of a dramatic reconstruction of a hijacking incident, in which 'the drama sections were subtitled and the narrator's voice was replaced by an English translation'. The adoption of this mixed approach to language transfer is indicative of a more flexible attitude on the part of some British broadcasters. Such moves are welcomed as a 'step in the right direction' by those who consider that only when we become more flexible in our attitudes will we be able to benefit from the advantages which being occupants of the common European home bestows.

The European dimension

The fact that national preferences should have become so firmly established has had particularly unfortunate consequences in that any suggestion of a move towards greater European uniformity in these matters is often treated as if it were an attack on another country's national sovereignty. We live in rapidly changing times, however, and all those involved in European broadcasting are aware that the days when one could remain

within nationally defined boundaries are long past. Adjusting to the requirements of the new age on the other hand is by no means as simple as many would have us believe and overcoming the language barriers in European television is almost certainly going to be a long-drawn out affair.

In the last ten years or so we have witnessed a series of highly significant developments in European television, many of which have implications for language transfer methods. There is first of all the proliferation of channels, and coupled with this a general increase in the number of hours that each channel is on air (daytime and night-time television). One consequence of these developments has been an increased demand for various types of imported material to fill the respective broadcasting schedules. While some of this programming comes ready-made, i.e. produced in the language of the target audience, a proportion of it has to be converted by one of the transfer methods. The second far-reaching change in the media ecology in recent years has of course been the increasingly important role played by satellite television. Satellites are, we know, no resisters of geographical boundaries, but linguistic barriers are not so lightly overcome. One of the major problems confronting Euro-wide satellite broadcasters therefore has been how to exploit the technological advantage of their extended outreach, while at the same time catering for the different linguistic needs of their audience.

Additional advances in television technology, some of them linked to the development of cable and satellite, have also opened up new possibilities for a more flexible approach to language transfer. It is well known, for instance, that satellite-delivered video signals can be accompanied by multiple sound channels. This considerably increases the *potential* for multilingual broadcasting and means that in some cases satellite viewers are able to opt for one of five or six language versions in which the programme is being transmitted (by simply tuning in to different audio frequencies on their receiver). The fact remains, however, that this facility will — for the foreseeable future at least — tend to be used for the type of programme which is fairly readily and cheaply transposed (e.g. sports commentaries) and not for material where the transfer process is more elaborate or time-consuming.

Given that satellite companies are going to be primarily guided by commercial imperatives in their programme scheduling, there has been a good deal of discussion in recent years — involving both European broadcasters and officials of the European Commission — as to what additional initiatives are necessary to promote the production and exchange of programmes within Europe. The fear is of course that in an increasingly deregulated environment broadcasters will opt to buy in still more imported material from non-European (mostly North American) sources, with the consequence that, far from learning more about our neighbours' separate and distinct identities through increased exposure to

their cultural artefacts, Euro-viewers will find themselves confronted with a greater volume of homogenized, bland products specifically designed for the international television markets. Of the various attempts to forestall this undesirable development, the one that deserves special mention in the light of our present concerns with the issue of language transfer is the EC's Media Programme. In conjunction with the EC's technical directive 'Eureka' and the economic directive on 'Television without Frontiers', the Media Programme has launched a series of projects to help 'ease the television and film production industries into the European single market' (Swain, 1989). One of the Media initiatives BABEL (Broadcasting Across the Barriers of European Language) is designed to give support in the area of subtitling and dubbing. More specifically it provides financial assistance to programme makers who have had material accepted for transmission by television stations but who need funds to dub or subtitle the programme in question. BABEL has so far only been able to support a limited number of projects, but it has at least raised people's awareness of the need for more funds to be made available for schemes of this type.

The attempt to encourage a greater emphasis on multilingual audiovisual production and to improve on existing language transfer techniques is not just aimed at promoting better *cultural* understanding and awareness amongst those who share the common European home. Equally important are the economic considerations which lie behind such schemes. In other words: if only more broadcasters — and ultimately their audiences — could be persuaded to adopt more enlightened attitudes to language conversion, this would immediately bring benefits for the European media industries who have so far found that the linguistic fragmentation of Europe has put them at a considerable disadvantage when seeking to compete with their American counterparts. As one critic has observed: 'with European production currently exceeding US production, if broadcasters would only adopt a more flexible approach to language conversion techniques and multilingual productions, a vast hitherto untapped source of programming would be made available to them' (Burnett, 1989: 38).

Mindful of some of the uncertainties which companies and organizations are facing in this present transitional phase of broadcasting, it is perhaps not surprising that many are still decidedly conservative when it comes to introducing more multilingual programming into their schedules. Part of the explanation is no doubt that some broadcasters, including several of the satellite operators, are still persisting with a basically monolingual service and feel that any experiments in multilingualism could be economically counterproductive. With most of the national broadcasting stations it goes without saying that they will adopt a predominantly monolingual approach. A similar monolingual strategy, however, is also employed by some of the large satellite broadcasters who attempt to target their audiences according to their membership of a particular language group.

The Francophone TV5 and the various Germanophone stations (RTL Plus, SAT 1 and 3Sat) are all instances of this approach, though — as some critics have commented — the economic viability of these stations depends on their ability to reach viewers in preferably at least two or more of the countries which share the common language (Burnett, 1989: 41).

With the Germanophone and Francophone monolingual stations mentioned above, the targeting of audiences has been confined to those areas where French or German is spoken as a first or second language. In the case of English language broadcasting, however, the situation is by no means as clear-cut. There has in fact been a rather presumptuous assumption on the part of some satellite broadcasters that, since English has in their eyes acquired the status of international lingua franca, one can expect a positive response from Euro-wide audiences to their English language programming. While it cannot be denied that English enjoys a wide currency, there is also a marked resistance amongst some audiences to having English foisted on them through an increasing number of television programmes. One of the clearest indications of this resistance has been the comparative lack of success that the satellite channels Sky and Super Channel have had in winning over viewers on the European continent to their English language programming. What may also have contributed to the consumer resistance is the fact that much of the broadcast material was characterized by a 'lowest common denominator' approach. Programming in which speech, dialogue or argument are important components has been given low priority, while programmes which rely for their effect on music, movement and display have become the staple diet. These attempts to internationalize television may be understandable in the light of the commercial imperative to reach the largest possible audience of 'younger generation' viewers, but they do have the unfortunate consequence of creating the impression of a bland uniformity, in which ideas of cultural distinctiveness and of separate national identity have been largely suppressed (Luyken, 1987a: 32).

The recognition that viewers are going to require more persuasion than originally anticipated to transfer their allegiance from national channels to pan-European channels has, as suggested, led satellite operators to reconsider their marketing strategies. One of these strategies has been, in the words of one commentator, 'to narrow down their target audience to cover only those territories least resilient to the English language' (Burnett, 1989: 38). At the same time, however, careful thought has been given to how the outreach of respective channels can be maximized by use of appropriate language transfer methods in conjunction with the more precise targeting of audiences. Eurosport, for instance, (part of The European Sports Network) now broadcasts to homes in thirty European countries. Given that much of their broadcast material is of the 'live action' variety, they are able to tailor their service to the separate linguistic

requirements of their audience by offering simultaneous transmissions in English, French, Dutch and German — with the Scandinavian languages to be added soon. Eurosport viewers can choose any of these languages by simply tuning to different audio frequencies on their receiver (doubtless a welcome development in the eyes of the language learning lobby!). Other satellite operators, while maintaining English as the basic language of transmission, have a policy of subtitling for those countries where this is the 'preferred' language transfer mode. The Discovery Channel — specializing in documentaries — subtitles 50 percent of its output in Swedish, Danish and Dutch. Similarly MTV Europe, which now reaches forty-four million viewers in thirty-one territories, subtitles a proportion of its programming, though the majority of its music-based programmes — being low on speech and dialogue — are clearly designed to transcend all language barriers by appealing direct to the universal audience already referred to.

The need of cable and satellite broadcasters to continue to extend their outreach has also resulted in significant new developments in the technology of language transfer methods. Several satellite broadcasters are now, for instance, making use of a system, designed and developed by MRG Systems, which incorporates a multilingual subtitling facility and allows up to seven sets of subtitles (one set per language) to be transmitted simultaneously. The system is Teletext-based and viewers simply call up the subtitles by dialling up the appropriate Teletext page (Mothersole and White, 1992: 72–80). One cable and satellite broadcaster making particularly effective use of this facility is the Children's Channel, which since 1986 has expanded its operations into continental Europe, and has now established a firm foothold in the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland (both through cable and home dish reception). Though subtitling is the standard transfer method employed by the Children's Channel, a limited number of programmes are also put out with a foreign language voice-over or commentary (so far only in Dutch). The subtitled programmes are also complemented by some non-verbal programmes, which — built as they are around mime and animation — both surmount language barriers and also are calculated to appeal to children who are below reading age. (It is worth noting, however, that all the above-mentioned countries are ones in which subtitling is firmly established as the nationally-preferred mode.)

Conclusion

What emerges from a study of audience preferences with regard to the various methods of language transfer is that — like so much else in life — attitudes to subtitling and dubbing, once firmly established, will be

relatively slow to change. In the European context the fact that these entrenched attitudes exist is a matter of some concern to those who feel that such views could jeopardize the prospects of the European audio-visual industries, especially with regard to staving off the challenge from America and elsewhere. In Europe, therefore, a key question in the subtitling—dubbing debate is likely to be to what extent and by what means audiences in those countries where dubbing has traditionally held sway can be persuaded to accept the less-expensive forms of language conversion (subtitling, narration and voice-over).

The readiness of audiences to change the habits of a lifetime are of course dependent on a number of factors, not all of them within the control of broadcasters. There is, for instance, the question of how quickly the moves to create a greater sense of European identity will change people's attitudes to the way in which they view their neighbours' language and culture. Will the much freer movement of goods and people in the post-1992 era lead to a greater demand for increased cultural exchange, including various forms of television programming? Will the growing recognition that Europe is actually made up of a wide range of diverse cultures make people more eager to discover more about this cultural distinctiveness? And how quickly will the disappearance of economic barriers be followed by the recognition that linguistic difference does not in itself pose an insuperable obstacle to understanding? All these are questions which have a direct bearing on how, in the course of time, attitudes to the issue of language transfer will change.

As far as viewers themselves are concerned, much is going to depend on the particular expectations with which they approach their television viewing. As the British surveys of the last few years have shown, if viewers look upon television primarily as a source of easily digestible entertainment, then some in the audience are inevitably going to regard subtitles as an impediment to their enjoyment. What the same surveys also reveal, however, is that even where the *general* audience tendency is to prefer dubbing as a transfer method (roughly in a proportion of 2:1), the situation is reversed amongst survey respondents who belong to the category of those who are educated beyond the age of twenty. In a BBC survey about audience response to foreign language films, for instance, it was discovered that more than 50 percent of viewers in this category preferred subtitles (BBC, 1984). Extending provision for further and higher education could clearly be one of the ways to overcome some of the problems that broadcasters are presently encountering in matters of language transfer.

There are also of course other steps that the broadcasters themselves can take to encourage their audiences to take a new attitude to foreign language material. Adopting a more flexible policy to the mixing of transfer modes, within a single programme if necessary, would be one way forward. Another would be to introduce progressively more subtitling into,

say, late-night programming slots, where initial adverse audience reaction may not be as crucial as at peak-viewing times. Within the British context, a key factor in this respect could be the requirement in the new Broadcasting Act that, from 1992, 50 percent of all material which lends itself to this type of conversion should be subtitled.

What will also play a decisive role in determining how quickly audiences begin to accept different modes of language transfer is whether the techniques and standards of the various conversion methods can themselves be improved. New technology has, as suggested, proved helpful in facilitating certain parts of the transfer work, but much remains to be done to raise the profile which both dubbing and subtitling have within the overall production process. All too often there is an embarrassing lack of coordination between those responsible for the original production and those undertaking the job of producing a dubbed or subtitled version. If standards are to improve, it is apparent that more thought needs to be given at an *earlier* stage of production as to what steps need to be undertaken and what information given to facilitate the process of multilingual transfer. It is worth noting in this respect that the authors of an important new study on dubbing and subtitling identify as one of the most pressing policy issues the need to effect

a gradual shift from audiovisual language transfer as an 'a posteriori post-production service' to 'a priori pre-production measures' designed to facilitate the multilingual production and exhibition . . . of programmes on a European as well as on a global scale. (Luyken et al, 1991: ii)

This is clearly a long-term objective and there will be doubtless resistance in some quarters to such measures, principally on grounds of cost. More likely to be successful in the shorter term are the proposals put forward by the European Broadcasting Union which have the aim of standardizing dubbing and subtitling procedures. The idea is that EBU standards should be set on soundtracks supplied with drama programmes to be dubbed and also on programme material to be subtitled. Again one can anticipate problems in getting widespread agreement to these proposals, but it is at least a step in the right direction.

As has been emphasized throughout this article, attitudes in matters of language transfer are not going to change rapidly. In today's harshly competitive world, television broadcasters are not likely to want to force the pace of change by increasing the amount of foreign language material contained in their schedule, without a reasonable guarantee that sections of their audience will not thereby become disaffected. At the same time, however, there are more hopeful signs that the whole issue of language transfer is now receiving the sort of serious consideration it has long deserved. Bodies such as the Commission of the European Communities,

the European Parliament and the European Broadcasting Union have all played a part in raising the profile of the issue and have in addition set in train a series of specific support schemes. Underlying many of these initiatives has been the attempt to preserve the cultural diversity of Europe in the more general move towards economic and political integration. Since cultural and linguistic matters are almost inevitably intertwined, particular concern has been expressed that the status of the so-called minority languages should be preserved. One of the strategies for achieving this has been to give special support to broadcasters to enable various types of imported material to be converted into the respective minority languages.

Much remains to be done, but the hope is that with further technological advances giving us access to still more channels (many from distant lands) and with our attitudes to the way we receive and use television also changing (an increasing emphasis on interactivity), so audiences will be more prepared to accept that some form of language transfer method will frequently be the key to gaining access to a range of programming hitherto denied them.

Notes

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1. The survey referred to here was produced for Channel 4 by the audience research organization BRMB and was based on data collected over a four-week period in the summer of 1988.

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