**AN OUTLINE OF SUBTITLING**

**1. What is Subtitling?**

Subtitling is one of the major types of screen translation, and can be defined as “incorporating on the screen a written text which is a condensed version in the target text of what can be heard on screen” (Chiaro, 148). Subtitling was originally invented as a screen translation method for those with a hearing disability. It is still used for this purpose; however, today, it has also become a means for translating screen products with the purpose of reaching a wider range of audience. The aim of this paper is to give an overall outline of subtitling as a translation activity with special emphasis on its limitations and advantages.

**2. Types of Subtitles**

**2.1. Open and Closed Captions**

The first distinction to make is between subtitles and captions. The only clear definition of the two concepts and the difference between open and closed captions can be found on a website dedicated for MP3 making:

Even though the terms “caption” and “subtitle” have similar definitions, “captions” commonly refer to on-screen text specifically designed for hearing impaired viewers, while “subtitles” are straight transcriptions or translations of the dialogue. Captions are usually positioned below the person who is speaking, and they include descriptions of sounds (such as gunshots or closing doors) and music. “Closed” captions are not visible until the viewer activates them. “Open” captions are always visible, such as subtitles on foreign videotapes.

In short, captions and subtitles differ in the purpose of production: captions merely for the use of the deaf and subtitles for the purpose of interlingual translation. The former may or may not be translated into another language, and provides more information than the latter such as nonverbal sounds that will contribute to the comprehension of the plot. The latter, on the other hand, is a condensed version of what is actually being said for reasons to be discussed in detail in 3.1.

**2.2. Fansubs**

Cintas and Sanchez define a fansub as a “fan-produced, translated, subtitled version of a Japanese anime programme” (37). However, Chiaro states that today “as well as cartoons, fansubbers create translations for a wide variety of television genres which, once subtitled, are subsequently made available over the internet” and she points out to one characteristic of fansubs as “they are more daring” than subtitles created by professional subtitling and “flout many conventions” (151,152). To sum up, funsubs are an amateur way of subtitling, and thus, it is only natural that they do not conform to certain standards of translation.

**3. Three Principles of Translating Operations in Subtitling**

According to Antonini, there are three principles operations to be carried out by the translator of the subtitles: “elimination, rendering and simplification”. These three operations are defined by Antonini as follows:

The first one involves depriving the target text of all those elements that do not modify the sense of the message but its form (e.g., pleonasms, hesitations, repetitions, onomatopoeia, interjections, etc.) and of those elements that the viewers can gather from the visual information; the second implies reproducing or, in most cases depriving the target text, of features such as dialects, slang, humor, acronyms, taboo language, etc; and, finally, the third sees the translator operating on the translated text by simplifying and fragmenting the syntactical structure of the aural text. (213,214)

These reductions in the source text can be justified by means of the technical limitations of subtitling as well as censorship issues. The point to be made is the fact that subtitles are inescapably a condensed version of the source text.

**4. Disadvantages of Subtitling**

**4.1. Technical limitations**

According to Koolstra, Peeters, and Spinhof, the need for the adjustment of subtitles to speech duration requires a certain amount of condensation in the speech that is actually spoken. The standard length of the longest subtitle can be up to 64 characters that can be displayed on the screen for only 6 seconds. And this poses a challenge to the translator, as he/she has to reduce the number of words without loss of information. This can only be done by rendering the information in the most concise way possible. One way is making use of the moments when the information in the speech overlaps the information provided via visual text; that is the viewer can catch up on the information that is nonexistent in the subtitles by the help of visuals provided in the screen product. Another technical disadvantage is part of the picture being covered with the subtitles (326-330).

Overall, the main disadvantage that stems from these technical limitations is the extra workload on the part of translators. Rendering the source text into target language is only the first step toward preparing the subtitles. The translator also has to decide how far he/she can reduce the verbal content without loss of information within the constraints of time and space.

**4.2. Censorship**

In subtitled screen products, “the original language is always present and potentially accessible” (Chiaro, 150), which can be recognized as both an advantage and a disadvantage of subtitling. It is an advantage as “the source language is not distorted in any way” (150); however, it also is a disadvantage as although “internationally well-known taboo swear words” are reduced in subtitles, they are still “clearly audible” and thus recognizable by audiences. The result is a less controllable product in terms of censorship of content that is offensive in any way.

**4.3. Distraction**

The viewer of a subtitled picture is assigned to the task of reading while at the same time watching, which can both be “disorienting” for the viewer (Chiaro, 151) and require “mental effort” (Koolstra, Peeters, and Spinhof, 332). However, as Chiaro states, “this challenge should not be overstated, because (1) there is reason to believe that subtitling audiences pay less attention to the spoken dialogue; (2) subtitles are becoming more and more ‘readable’ and user-friendly” (151). Furthermore, this task of watching, listening and reading all at the same time will present an invaluable advantage to the audience over time, as discussed in 5.3.

**5. Advantages of Subtitling**

**5.1. Cost-effective**

One of the major reasons for the popularity of subtitling is that it is an “inexpensive form of screen translation [especially] for a relatively restricted number of spectators” (Chiaro, 143). This results from the fact that the process of subtitling involves a fewer number of persons at work compared to dubbing. For example, there is no need for dubbing actors or a dubbing director. A translator and a technician can carry out all the process of subtitling the whole screen product, which makes it less costly than screen translation methods such as dubbing.

**5.2. Time saving**

Subtitiling is a much simpler method of screen translation, especially compared to the rival method, dubbing, which means it takes considerably shorter to subtitle a product than to dub it. Considering “world markets demand that products are screened soon after being premiered in the USA” (Chiaro, 143), subtitling is a more convenient form.

**5.3. Learning effects**

Subtitling is viewed as a means of facilitation of reading and acquisition of foreign languages by Koolstra, Peeters, and Spinhof:

Watching television may be regarded as an active process in which viewers are constantly watching and listening, and in the case of subtitled programmes, also reading. The effect of watching a programme may be that viewers acquire the information intended to be conveyed by the producers of the programme. But watching television may also lead to unintentional learning effects: merely by participating in the activity, television viewing leads to acquiring skills that are not directly related to the content of the programme.

Because the foreign language can be heard while the translation is being read in subtitled television programmes, viewers might be able to pick up some words of the foreign language... The possibility of learning a foreign language through watching subtitled television programmes is not only highly valued, but also demonstrated in studies with adults as participants. (339)

Thus, what has been discussed as a disadvantage, watching and reading at the same time, can also be put forward as an advantage of subtitling. Providing both the source language and its equivalent in the target language at the same time, subtitled screen products promote foreign language learning although this might take place unintentionally.

**6. Conclusion**

To sum up, subtitling in translation is a convenient method of screen translation as it is not as costly as other methods, and is a quick way of making screen products available to a wide range of cultures at the same time as it does not require lengthy procedures. It is also used as a means of learning and improving foreign languages, especially by the young. It is not without disadvantages, though. The original text being available for the audience can create a disadvantage especially when parts of the text need to be censored for various reasons.

Works Cited

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