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Subtitling multilingual films

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Abstract

How to translate films in which more than one language appears is an interesting question to a translator who may not have the full range of possible solutions at hand. Although many approaches to this problem have been advanced, not all offer clear solutions. Of interest are problems relating to the analysis of what the translators have done, and with what quality to decide whether their solutions are satisfactory and what could be done if they are not. It is also interesting to explore if there could be a general solution applicable to more than one case. In this article I will deal not only with these possible solutions for translation when faced with more than one language in the source, but also with what might be done with the use of different dialects or idiolects or sociolects. My proposal will be the use of some features taken from subtitling for the hard of hearing (SHD), such as the use of different colors or the paratextual information within brackets.

1 The translation of films with more than one language

In his book *Subtitles, Translation & Idioms*, (Gottlieb 1997: 114-115) and in his more recent article "Language-political implications of subtitling" (Gottlieb 2004: 84), Henrik Gottlieb talks about the case of the American film *Dances with Wolves*, by Kevin Costner in 1990, subtitled in Danish. According to Gottlieb, in the sequence where the protagonist first encounters the Native Americans, the parts in Lakota are also subtitled, so the Danish audience can read the translation of the Lakota words, while the American audience in the theatres could not. Apparently, as Gottlieb says, the deciding factor may have been that the American movie version for DVD had the Lakota speech subtitled into English for the domestic audience.

Next, we could consider the case of the Iranian film *The Vote is Secret* (*Raye Makhfi*, 2001, directed by Babak Payami) subtitled in Spanish, as it was released for the cinemas in 2001. A woman has to collect all the votes for a political election in a remote island and in one part of the film the inhabitants of this island speak among each other in a language different than Farsi, and this part is not subtitled. Only when the dialogs are translated into Farsi, these are subtitled.

What should the approach be to that question? It would seem reasonable that one should translate what has already been translated in the original version. Or, we may add, when we are sure that the audience of the source text will understand all the different languages used in the original. This could be the case in films produced in Catalonia, where both Catalan and Spanish are used for Catalan audiences; a situation that seems to be more and more frequent in recent times. This is the case of *Anita no perd el tren*, (*Anita doesn't take chances*) by Ventura Pons, released in 2002. In this film, the characters use Catalan

mainly, but one of them, played by the Spanish actress María Barranco always speaks in Spanish. The entire Catalan audience can understand both languages, due to Catalonia's political situation. But, how should we translate this into another language? I think we should translate both languages, since both were supposed to be understood by the audience of the source text. But the question one could ask is: should we somehow mark the presence of two different languages?

If we look at the English version of this film, included in the DVD for Spain, nothing marks this difference, so some English speaking viewers who don't know either Catalan or Spanish may not be able to feel the difference between both languages, if we think of what Europeans know about Spain, and specially about Catalonia, where even university students who go there on the Erasmus exchange programme ignore that most of the lessons at a Catalan university will be in this "strange", "unknown" language.

Is it always like that? Is there another possibility? Let's take another example: the Indian film *Monsoon Wedding*, by Mira Nair, released in 2002. The film is mostly spoken in English, since it portrays the upper classes in Delhi, and this class supposedly uses English, although they do use some words and even sentences in Hindi. In fact, the contrary is closer to the reality of India, where more than 1,600 languages (15 official) are spoken, with a strong presence of English as a *lingua franca*, so most people speak their own language with a lot of expressions and words in English.

In this film, in the Spanish subtitled version for the DVD, normal letter types are used for the English dialogs, but italics are used for the parts originally spoken in Hindi.

This seems to be a good solution to me, for the spectators to become aware that the characters are using different languages. But, should the occasionally spoken language be translated or kept in the original language and merely transcribed? An example to this can be found in the case of Fassbinder's film *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (1979). The film is about the economic wonder in Germany, after WW II. Maria Braun lost her husband during the war, and she is looking for him once the war is over. Meanwhile, she gets to know an American officer who was sent to Germany. Maria Braun takes advantage of the situation, and starts learning English with him, apart from becoming his fiancée. In the subtitled French version released by Video Arte, La Sept, the parts where English is spoken are simply not translated, not even transcribed. Some of these parts correspond to a trial, where the English parts are immediately translated into German. But there are other parts where they just speak English, and the translator or the distributor decided not to translate them into French. Maybe they considered that most of German people didn't understand English at the time the film was released, in the late 70s.

On his point, I would like to add that there is a trend right now in Germany to use a lot of English words and expressions, for instance, advertising is mostly in English, specially the logos and slogans. Well, according to the article "Die Sense stimuliert" by Thomas Tuma which appeared in the German magazine *Der Spiegel* (2003:87) a survey was done in this field to find out if most of the people understood these slogans, and the results showed that most of them didn't. Slogans like "Come in and find out", for the Douglas, a German company, was mostly understood as "Come in and find the way out". Or the slogan "Be inspired", for the also German company Siemens, was mostly understood as "The inspired bee (insect)". All this is just to illustrate that one could say that English was not a common language in Germany in the late 70s, as it is right now.

Going back to the question above, could we just transcribe the English words, instead of leaving the subtitles out? This was done in the Spanish subtitles for a DVD released by the Spanish FNAC¹. The parts spoken in English were transcribed. It is very likely that the same

¹ "Fédération nationale d'achats des cadres", lateron "Fédération nationale d'achats", a chain of stores selling products of the entertainment industry (music, literature, video games etc).

translator who did the French parts knew enough English to ~~de~~ transcribe the English parts; but what if it had been Russian? Imagine she gets to know a Russian officer instead of an American one, would the translator simply transcribe the Russian parts?

It's like the situation of the Icelandic singer Björk. She sings mostly in English, but she often uses some words in her own language, Icelandic, as in the song *Bachelorlurette*, which appeared in the concert *Live at Shepherds Bush* (1997). When this happens, should these Icelandic words be translated? Should they be left in Icelandic? Well, since I could assume that most people don't speak Icelandic, what would that bring? As I already stated in the introduction, I think that a possible and reasonable solution would be the addition of this information (Icelandic) within brackets, or the use of different colors.

But what happens when more than two languages are used? Should we mark this difference, and if we do so, how? Maybe we could use italics for all the secondary languages, if this is the case. There is another German film which uses more than one language: *Der Himmel über Berlin* (Wim Wenders, 1987). In this film, we find German, English and French mostly, but also Turkish and other languages. An angel is sent to the Earth, to Berlin, to help other people, but would like to stay there and become human. The two angels appearing in the film are played by the German actors Otto Sander and Bruno Ganz, and they speak in German; the French circus actress (played by Solveig Dommartin) speaks in French, and Peter Falk, playing himself, speaks in English. The Spanish subtitled version release in DVD only uses one type of letter, and they use no alternative way to show these different languages.

Another film where we find more than two different languages is *L'auberge espagnole* (Cédric Klapisch, 2002). In this film, we find more than one language besides French, the main language: Spanish, Catalan and English. In the French subtitles, as they appear in the DVD, this difference is not marked, so the audience cannot distinguish between Catalan, French or English, and the same is the case in the Spanish DVD: nothing marks the different languages in the Spanish subtitles.

2 Subtitling dialects and sociolects

Another case which could be related to this one, even if it is slightly different, is the use of dialects or sociolects. All translators know how difficult it is to render these differences in subtitles or dubbing. There is a good example in the subtitled translation of *My Fair Lady* (1964), directed by George Cukor. As is well known, this film is the cinema adaptation of Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion*. Although the subject of the film (and the play) is the power of language, and how to change your social and financial standing due to the use of language, it is interesting to see that even the intralinguistic subtitles in English only display a very poor rendering of this special use of cockney. This may be of interest at the beginning of the film, to get an idea of the character, but neither in the Spanish subtitled version nor in the Spanish dubbed one can we find any marks.

There is a chapter, where Professor Higgins tries to teach Miss Doolittle how to pronounce; but she cannot do it. The famous translation into Spanish, I would even dare to say that almost everybody knows it, is when he says "The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain", and she repeats by pronouncing: "The rine in Spine stays mostly in the pline" (in the English intralinguistic caption).

In the same chapter, later on, there is a passage where she tries to learn how to pronounce 'h', because a silent 'h' is a typical characteristic for cockney; and they use a mirror with a flame, so that if she pronounces the 'h' correctly, the flame wavers and this is shown in the mirror. The sentence she has to pronounce is: "In Hartford, Hereford and

Hampshire hurricanes hardly ever happen”, which is transcribed as “In 'artford, 'ereford and 'ampshire 'urricanes 'ardly hever 'appen”.

In the Italian subtitles, in both cases, “The rain in Spain...” and “In Hartford, Hereford...” the sentences are simply neither translated nor transcribed, when pronounced incorrectly. I really think that it could be a good solution, since the audience is always aware that she speaks in English, in this English sociolect, and that she is trying to learn to pronounce differently, and that they are in London. So, maybe this is more honest, and a good solution. Again, maybe the use of brackets, as is used with the SDH could be useful, just as a warning to the viewers that someone is using a dialect or a sociolect, when this is relevant.

3 Subtitling speech impediments

A final question related to the other questions mentioned above is the use of particular words, for instance, when some actor is speaking in a special manner. Here are two examples: the film *The life of Brian* (1979), by Monty Python, and *Star Wars I, The Phantom Menace* (1999), by George Lukas. In both films a variety of language is used, although this use differs from one film to the other, because in one, *Life of Brian*, it is a speech impediment, and in the other it is the use of an invented language, the language of Jar Jar Binks and his people. The question one should ask is: should we maintain these effects or speech impediments in the subtitles? Maybe one could ask, why not? But, since subtitles are written, as opposed to the oral nature of the original, or the dubbed version, it is easy to imagine that it could be difficult to render these differences in the written version, in the subtitles. Well, if we take a look at these subtitles, we can see that the differences were maintained. In the first example, Pilate utters the English ‘r’ as if it were a ‘w’.

The first thing we observe is that the Spanish subtitles change the standard Spanish ‘r’ into a ‘d’. So, not always, but often, when there should be an ‘r’ in the English word, they write it with a ‘d’, or sometimes, even with two. However, it is not very common to use misspellings in subtitles. The question now is: should we write them in italics or just in normal letters? We could relate this to *My Fair Lady*. Should we use italics to show when she speaks improperly? Well, in the case of the Spanish subtitles, these words are written in normal letters, not in italics. The other person in the film who speaks with an impediment is Biggus Maximus. But he speaks with the ‘th’ sound instead of ‘s’. It is also interesting to see how to represent that in languages that do not have this pronunciation problem, like Catalan, French or Italian. It would be interesting to see how it is transcribed.

What happens with *Star Wars*? Well, they use this strange artificial language, actually based on English. In the Spanish subtitles, we find these words translated, but also misspelled; and they are not in italics; and are not easy to follow; so that maybe one could use them, but not as often as they are used in the original, and better present them in italics to better mark them.

4 Conclusions

To sum up, we have seen many different instances of the use of a different language in a given film, or even the use of several languages in the same film. We have also seen examples of the use of a special dialect or sociolect in a film, a matter that appears as a very difficult one to solve. We observed which solutions were found in these cases, and we discussed the difficulty of translating those instances. Problems like this often represent a

challenge for translators, since they are not always aware of the range of possibilities that exist when rendering such diversity.

The solutions we observed are the following: not to mark the use of a different language; to mark it by not translating it, to mark it by transcribing it, or to translate it. If we chose the last solution, we can use either normal letters or italics; and it seems advisable to use italics, since it is a way to show this special use, but not to translate all of the “special” words, since it could become difficult for the viewers to follow.

A similar problem arises when dealing with more than two languages. As we have seen, most of the cases referred to here were not marked, leaving the audience unaware of the existence of different language levels. One possible solution could be the use of different colors, as we know is done in subtitling for the hard of hearing.

Another possible solution, also taken from SDH could be the “note” within brackets, as in the Icelandic in Björk's songs, just to warn the audience that what they are hearing is not English, and that the non-appearance of the subtitles is not due to the translator's incompetence.

Another question is the problem of the use of dialects or sociolects and even “invented” languages as well as speech impediments. Because of the special nature of subtitles, it seems advisable not to use misspellings. And maybe it would be advisable to use italics, when doing so. Again, another possible solution to these problems could be the addition of information in brackets, as in the Subtitles for the Hard of Hearing to warn the audience of something irregular in the language used.

As already pointed out at the Conference *Media for all*, held at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona in June 2005, I really think we should reconsider the traditional gap between intralingual subtitles for the hard of hearing and subtitles for the hearing, and try to take advantage of the possibilities offered there to solve traditionally “difficult” problems.

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