

Pilar Orero (Barcelona)

Voice-over: A Case of Hyper-reality

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Abstract

“Le simulacre n'est jamais ce qui cache la verité C'est la verite qui cache qu'il n'y en pas... Le Simulacre est vrai.” (Baudrillard 1981: 1).

Voice-over is an audiovisual translation modality usually associated with non-fiction genres (Kilborn 1993: 648, Díaz Cintas and Orero 2006: 477). This association has been established by taking into account two issues: that voice-over is the preferred translation modality for audiovisual genres, such as documentaries and news (Franco 2000: 235, Espasa 2004; David 2004), and that translation plays a role in the construction of reality (Franco 2001). Both issues will be discussed in this article, first by studying the concept of simulacrum and hyper-reality and second by looking at formal features of voice-over in translation regarding its non-fictional association, and asking how hyper-reality is achieved to create the feeling of a non-fictional product.

1 Hyper-reality

The concepts of “hyper-reality” and “simulacrum” were introduced by McLuhan’s direct heir, the French sociologist Jean Baudrillard (Merrin 2001: 95, Barker 2006: 3). They are useful tools for both analysis and description in the field of Audiovisual Translation Studies because they can help in the understanding of the reception of audiovisual media and its translation in answer to the question of why voice-over is associated with the non-fictional genres and how the creation of reality is achieved.

Simulacrum is not a new concept. It has been known in Western civilization from ancient times and has been studied in areas such as theology, philosophy and aesthetics in cultures which centered on the image and the power it portrays. William Merrin (2001: 88) describes this power: it “possesses a remarkable hold over the hearts and minds of humanity – as having the capacity to assume for us the force of that which it represents, threatening in the process the very distinction of original and image”. In Western societies this power, as Baudrillard (1998a: 34) wrote, has long been recognized as a threat to the real since we, through audiovisual media or any media such as books, photography, and the constructed image “live in denial of the real” and consume reality as a sign. With audiovisual media, the effect (McLuhan 1994: 41) is that of a vast process of simulation where coded signifiatory

elements are combined to create a “neo-reality” (Baudrillard (1998a: 126) which takes all the attributions and strength of reality. Baudrillard even goes further, saying that reality is abolished “in favor of this neo-reality of the model” (ibid). Voice-over, which is part of the media in the sense that it is a mode of audiovisual translation, has long been associated with the real and I suggest it is –borrowing from Baudrillard (1994b: 2) - “substituting signs of the real for the real”. Voice-over has been successful in assuming the position of the real as Merrin (2001: 98) puts it “eclipsing it today by its *excess* of truth, by its minute ‘hyperrealization’ of the real. This hyper-reality is, therefore, not unreal but quite the opposite: it is an “excessive semio-realization of the real”, which is more real than the real. In Translation Studies, which - from a linguistic perspective - achieves the same effect of “reconstructed reality”, Darwish (2006: 54) examines aspects of translation-mediated news in the Arab TV station Aljazeera. While in his work the focus is on the language, this article focuses on the formal features of the translation modality voice-over.

2 Voice-over and its association to non-fiction genres

From early academic work on Audiovisual Translation and Media Studies, voice-over has been described as offering an “exact” and “faithful” rendering of the original source text. Luyken (1991: 80) defined voice-over as:

The faithful translation of original speech, approximately synchronous delivery, used only in the context of monologs such as an interview response or a series of responses from a single interviewee. The original sound is either reduced entirely or to a low level of audibility. A common practice is to allow the subsequently reduced ... so that the translated speech takes over... alternatively if the translation is recorded as part of the original production, it may follow the original speech exactly.

It is true that voice-over is used in TV news or documentaries in order to portray the feeling of authenticity of the discourse contents (Luyken 1991: 80) and that is portrayed by the voice of the speaker (Pönniö 1995: 304), the accent or regional variation (Fawcett 1983), the language (Darwish 2006: 58), or the TV format. As Franco explains (2001: 290):

... the type of delivery we hear in voice-over translation is an important strategic way of reassuring viewers that what they are being told in their own language is what is being said in the original language, although it is known that what they will be listening to is in fact only a representation of the original discourse.

For authors such as Kilborn (1993: 648) this transfer mode is “particularly well suited as a method for the rendering of speeches by foreign politicians”, so much that “many in the audience would now deem it wholly inappropriate if any other mode were used”.

3 The different traits in portraying the feeling of reality

Some of the formal features which have been traditionally quoted in Translation Studies to define voice-over (as seen in the previous section) have only been hinted at, without any further analysis. In fact, there is still much room for an in-depth study of voice-over, its function, its formal features and the translation of content. Given the fact that voice-over is the modality most commonly used for translating politician’s speeches and to inform about international news, the lack of attention it has received is surprising from the perspective of Audiovisual Translation, and Translation Studies in general. Darwish (2006: 54) comments

“Despite the crucial role in news making, however, translation in the news has thus occupied a very small area of research into translation and communication studies in general. Translation-mediated news production is generally acutely under-researched and particularly not researched at all in Arabic television.” Given the length and scope of this article only some of the most salient formal features of voice-over will be analyzed and it is hoped that some interest will be generated to lead to further study.

4 The delay effect

Voice-over’s most characteristic feature is, as Chaume (2003: 21) explains “the short delay in the translation and the availability of the original soundtrack”. And it is precisely this: hearing a few seconds of the original recording – the voice of the speaker in his original language – that creates the feeling of reality (Daly 1985; Ávila 1997). Darwish 2003 & 2006, Abusalem 2006 and Darwish and Orero (2006) have looked at the many complex interventions performed in the voice-over of translated texts, which are read on top of the original recording. They have established that reporting translated scripts is far from a literal translation exercise and “rather approximate and relative. It is subject to various factors that will influence the translation and that affect its level of accuracy such as: translator’s ideology, dominance, power, political debates, and political gains are all factors of critical importance.” (Absusalem 2006: 33). Hence, given the wide availability of voice-over translation and its use for matters of international politics and security, some academic research should be done in this area. While the content of the translation delivered by voice-over has not been researched so far, Darwish (2006), Abusalem (2006), and Darwish and Orero (2006) have started to look into the interventions and procedures used when translating news with voice-over.

5 The voice which replaces the original voice

This phenomenon has received hardly any attention (Díaz Cintas 1997, Orero 2005) and has been mentioned only in passing by Daly (1985) and Ávila (1997). Though some authors have commented on the accent of the voice who records the translation, no work has been carried out on the actual features of the voice: male/female, pitch, accent etc. There may be a certain degree of interest in matching voices for reading the translated text. If the person speaking is a middle-aged man, the voice-actor usually matches the genre and the age. Some agencies such as IMS (Independent Media Support Group plc) are known for trying to match voices according to the expectation of the target audience:

Our multilingual production team selected highly experienced artists who were able to convey the tone the film demanded in an appropriate manner to each language. Understanding of the cultural differences is hugely important. For example, for the French version we chose a woman’s voice, whereas a male voice was more appropriate for the Turkish video¹.

This indicates that the voice – with its many qualifiers - may be one more important element to create the feeling of hyper-reality and generate what has been called the “constructed reality”, which is then reported as non-fiction genre or news as observed by Sigal (1986 quoted in Darwish 2006: 55) “News is not what happens, but what someone says has happened or will happen”.

¹ Text copied from http://www.ims-media.com/docs/voiceover_1.html.

6 The accent of the voice

Linked with the quality of voice and with a higher – marginally academic - attention in the studies on Audiovisual Translation are Fawcett's (1983: 187) and Pönniö's (1995: 304) observations. They question the adequacy of “a documentary on African tribal life with voice-overs in impeccable “Oxford” English” and comment on the use of accents when delivering the voice-over.

It would be interesting to look at other countries and find out if voice-over is delivered by a voice-talent –as is the case of documentaries – or by a journalist or by the translators (Abusalem 2006; Ali 2006). In Spain and Catalonia voice-over translations are read by voice-talents or journalists who are native Catalan or Castilian speakers, hence producing the paradox of wanting to give the impression of authenticity while at the same time the perfect delivery in Catalan or Spanish will show that the person who speaks in a foreign language is not the same as the one who is doing the locution.

There is an interesting case in Spanish TV in the program *Redes* on La 2. In each program there is an interview with an international scientific personality. The director and presenter Eduard Punset does the interview in English, and the material is then sent to be translated. Once the translation is done, and editing is in order (Kelly 2006: 5), Eduard Punset himself voices in Spanish. The overall effect is that most people think that Punset translates his own questions, and in some occasions people even believe that the interview is live, and that there is simultaneous interpretation. This technique is also used at Aljazeera and has been observed in recent interviews with Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Turkish Prime Minister - a very illustrative example of Merrin's explanation of Braudillard's hyperreality concept (2001: 198) which is “not unreal but quite the opposite: an excessive semio-realization of the real” which is in fact more real than the real.

The ability to speak in English and translate himself simultaneously confers upon Punset the attribute of a media demigod.

In a recent publication Zinovi Zinick (2006: 14), a writer who lends his voice to the BBC, writes “you create an image of ethnic origin by simulating in English the idiosyncrasies of the other's original tongue.” This is especially interesting because one has to be English to have the stereotyped accent of someone French: such as the TV character René played by Gorden Kaye who impersonated a French accent to portray a French barman in the famous BBC TV series *'Allo, 'Allo* (1985) or the infamous character of Manuel played by Andrew Sachs in *Fawlty Towers* (1975).

The use of the translator's voice may also be used as a disclaimer. According to Darwish (2006: 63) journalists, not translators do most translations, although interpreters and translators are also expected to do voiceovers. He also mentions (2006: 58) that this is responsible for the quality of the translations since “given the poor translation skills of most journalists and translators (as attested by the numerous examples of erroneous translations) and the lack of structured methodologies in news translation that ensure accuracy, fairness, truthfulness, *objectivity* [emphasis in original] and neutrality of reported news and transferred information through translated documentaries, major violations of these principles are inevitable.”

The accent of the voice may also imply that an indirect translation has been performed (Abusalem 2006: 26; Darwish 2006: 63), i.e. that a non-native speaker of English has translated the text and then delivered it: which again makes us fall into the hyperreality trap. Indirect translation for voice-over is a common practice in the UK and the Arabic speaking TV stations (Abusalem 2006 and Darwish 2006). I was often called to translate into English when there was no written text and the translation had to be done from the screen or from the tape, as for example in the BBC Radio Programme “The History of Football” where I had to translate Kubala and Di Stefano.

Abusalem (2006: 26) links the level of accuracy in translation to native speaker quality: “the translated script ...may affect the level of accuracy and validity of the content being translated.” Darwish (2006: 58) accentuates the fact that *translation-journalists* and news presenters work as translators delivering bad quality translations. He provides numerous examples for the phenomenon which “is a serious problem that is increasingly causing misrepresentations, misunderstandings and communication breakdown across nations and cultures in globalized news media.”

7 The visible translator

Proceeding from the Punset example above we can also look at the issue of transparency (Allouba 1992), or, in Venuti’s (1995) terminology, the ‘invisible translator’. While translators across countries and modalities are usually invisible – which proves what a good job they do – there are interesting examples for the complete opposite as in the following case of Bin Laden and his voice-over, where the translator is not only acknowledged but signalled, when the following item appeared on the screen²:

“The BBC’s security correspondent Gordon Corera assesses what motivated the latest audio tape attributed to Osama Bin Laden, and looks for other clues in the message”.³

In second 17, the following insert appeared: “VOICE OF TRANSLATOR”. The news presenter was BBC’s Security Correspondent Gordon Corera, but a foreign voice delivered the translation as voice-over, which could be heard in the background. It was believed to be Bin Laden’s voice, at least that was the feeling given with the few seconds of delay. Whether it was Bin Laden or not is impossible to assess by the original soundtrack, which is quite muffled. The translation delivered in the two languages, as described by Luyken et al. (1991: 80) “contributes to the sense of authenticity in the translation and prevents a degree of mistrust from developing”.



Fig. 1: BBC Newsnight and BBC News 24 Hours, 23 April 2006, 20: 12 GMT 21: 12 UK

It is suggested as a topic for further research to investigate why voice-over offers to the audience this “reality or authenticity” feeling even though we know – as is documented in the work of Eliana Franco (2001a: 290) - that “the type of delivery we hear in voice-over translation is an important strategic way of reassuring viewers that what they are being told in their own language is what is being said in the original language, although it is known that what they will be listening to is in fact only a *representation* of the original discourse”.

² BBC Newsnight and BBC News 24 Hours, 23 April 2006, 20: 12 GMT 21: 12 UK

³ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4937232.stm

As such the impression of what is called “reality TV”, matches exactly the concept of “hyper-reality” mentioned above: “This news item is a media simulacrum which is taken for real life” (Barker 2006: 3).

Returning to the insert of Bin Laden speaking “VOICE OF TRANSLATOR”, it needs to be emphasized that such insert has not been used for any other political personality or footage in all the archives of the BBC news online videos, which raises the question of why the translator’s presence was so openly acknowledged here. While in some countries such as Spain and Catalonia, translators and their associations lobby for the recognition of authorship of their translations, in other countries such as in the Middle East, and more particularly in Iraq, translators prefer to go unnoticed due to the risk involved in rendering such translations. Examples are given on the webpages by Campagna and Sabra (2004), Human Rights Watch (2006) or in the Daily Times (2004), e.g.: “I expect to be killed at any moment. But I have to work to live” or “I’m supporting my husband. We have to feed and clothe our baby”. In Iraq alone, “nine fixers, translators and drivers have been killed in 2004, while at least a dozen others have been threatened, attacked or injured” (Witchel 2004: 6, cited in Venter 2005: 48).

James Dunnigan (2003) and Kadhim Ali (2006) present a chilling account of the role and fate of translators and interpreters in Iraq. Dunnigan (2002) in the Strategy webpage⁴ gives advice on how to recruit a translator in Iraq:

You want your new translator to understand that he has to play by American rules while he's on the payroll. This is why you want an Arab speaking soldier or Department of Defense civilian to explain this touchy stuff in his native language, to avoid any misunderstanding or unintended insults. There are also religious and ethnic differences in Iraq that could make things dangerous for an Iraqi translator going into the wrong neighborhood. So you have to find out if your applicant can deal with that.

A possible answer is that - given the many fatwa issued in recent years to writers and journalists (which in itself is news content) - the profession has decided to play it safe. When a news item is considered to be a “sensitive” issue translators wish to detach themselves from the content in order not to be held responsible for the translation content (and in the above example for voicing Bin Laden words), although in fact they are only doing their job as professionals as the journalists do also.

8 The format of the material

Different formats lend themselves particularly well to the feeling of hyper-reality, such as video-conferencing. By filming a video-conference, the overall sensation is that it is taking place in real time. In the above example of Eduard Punset we have the presenter sitting down in the studio and the interviewee who is clearly not there in person, is projected on a wall.

⁴ StrategyPage gives you rapid access to military news. We report these events as history, not headlines, and provide concise, comprehensive and easy-to-understand descriptions of the troops, their equipment and why wars the world over are being fought.



Fig. 2a: *Videoconference with Eduard Punset*

But to heighten the feeling of reality, an insert is added with the words ‘Videoconferencia desde EEUU (Cornell University)’.



Fig. 2b: *Videoconference with Eduard Punset*

In this case, the format of video conferencing and its simulated reality is enhanced by the use of the insert on the screen. The feeling is that of reality and immediacy: the interview is taking place in real time, even though as already mentioned earlier, we find Punset interpreting himself simultaneously.

9 Conclusions

One of the most salient features of voice-over is that of being associated with non-fiction genres and portraying the feeling of authenticity and faithfulness of the content of translation. As we have seen, voice-over is one more feature to make audiovisual media a construct of reality, which in some extreme cases seems to be more real than reality.

After analyzing the concept of simulacrum and hyperreality, we have imported it to the area of Audiovisual Translation Studies in order to understand and explain how voice-over helps to portray the feeling of reality, and why it has been traditionally associated with it. The study has only discussed European media. It will be much more interesting to understand and learn about the different variants on voice-over from other cultures such as in the Arab countries, Japan, China or India.

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