

### 3.0 CHAPTER TWO – SUBTITLING

This chapter will look at the concept of subtitling. Definitions will be provided of the main concepts and an explanation of the general theory behind subtitling will be given. Discussion will then move on to a more detailed analysis of the constraints associated with subtitling and the implications in terms of translation. Finally, the impact of these constraints on cultural features will be examined, paying particular attention to the elements of culture outlined in the previous chapter, namely dialect and accent.

Subtitles can be defined as ‘transcriptions of film or TV dialogue, presented simultaneously on the screen’.<sup>1</sup> The types of subtitling available can be divided into two categories: intralingual and interlingual subtitling. Intralingual subtitling deals with the production of subtitles that remain in the same language as the original and are used for the deaf or hard of hearing, or for language learners. Henrik Gottlieb describes it as vertical, ‘in the sense that it involves taking speech down in writing, changing mode but not language.’<sup>2</sup> Interlingual subtitling, on the other hand, refers to both a change in mode and language, going ‘from one language into another language, and from spoken dialogue into a written, condensed translation which appears on the screen.’<sup>3</sup> Therefore, for the purposes of this work, “subtitling” will refer to the interlingual subtitling described above.

When looking at subtitling, from the point of view of translation, many constraints exist that will effect the translation in question and cause the translator to modify the source text to a certain degree. Firstly, there are synchronisation constraints, which affect a number of aspects of language transfer. The very fact that the medium changes from oral to written will cause problems, given that it generally takes longer to process information received through the eyes than through the ears. So, if, in the spoken text, a large amount of information is provided, in the subtitles it will be necessary to modify the way this information is presented without losing any of it, in order to simplify the delivery and account for the change of medium. Similarly, if the length of certain utterances is too great or the structure too complex, it will be necessary to make some modifications in order to facilitate understanding through the written format. A long, complex sentence, although easy to comprehend if heard, would be very difficult to follow if it were left unaltered, given the timeframe available to read subtitles. For example, if we take the following narration as the spoken version of a text:

“In beautiful autumnal colours, the stunning models glided around the splendid arena, oozing sophistication and elegance, doing rightful justice to the imaginative designers.”

the subtitled written would more than likely be rendered in a more simplistic fashion, such as :

“In the arena the designers’ outfits were modelled with style and elegance.”

This also relates to the reading speed of the viewer, which needs to be taken into consideration. Clearly, establishing the profile of the target audience will be crucial in assessing the viewer’s potential reading speed and is an important factor for the translator. In this aspect, literacy and age are both influencing factors. For example, there is likely to be a great deal of difference between an adult’s and a child’s reading speed, and, as such, the subtitles would need to be altered accordingly, for example, by simplifying the vocabulary for a child. Also, if the subtitled version of a broadcast were to be shown in a country with a low level of literacy, it would be necessary to ensure the subtitles were fairly basic. So, ‘an accurate assessment of audience literacy and of the viewers’ knowledge of the subject matter is therefore essential to the success of subtitling’.<sup>4</sup> Another constraint, in terms of synchronising the subtitling, is the correlation with the visuals on-screen and the sound track. In other words, the subtitles must link up with what the viewer is seeing and hearing on the screen, so they are able to maintain their coherence. This is especially important if the translator is dealing with a visual gag or comedy element, in which case it would not be correct to spoil the surprise before the joke has happened. The same would apply in a “whodunit” type of scene, where it is vital to the story for the viewer not to be aware of a clue or perhaps the identity of a culprit until the appropriate moment. Frame changes represent another constraint to the translator. If a subtitle appears over a frame

change, it is likely that the subtitle will be lost to the viewer, as their attention is likely to be diverted away from the subtitle, due to the change in scene. Therefore, the translator must ensure that the subtitles have disappeared from the screen by the time the frame changes. However, sometimes this is not always possible. As Josephine Dries points out, ‘a good subtitler will wish to avoid a subtitle staying on screen across a shot change, and certainly across a scene change. When cuts follow each other too quickly, the minimum reading time (in most countries 1 ½ seconds, in some 1 second) sometimes forces the subtitlers to break this law’.<sup>5</sup> A final constraint, which must be accounted for, involves the medium through which the subtitles are to be shown, which, in turn, will affect factors such as font size and audience age range. In cinemas, for example, the size of the screen is much larger and therefore, will allow more flexibility with regard to the font size of the subtitles, making the reading of them easier and more comfortable for the viewer, whereas, on television, the translator is restricted to a smaller screen space, thereby limiting the size of the font. Also, the type of audience likely to be attracted by these two mediums will differ, in which case the translator’s task is made more difficult as they are less likely to be able to assess the reading speed and literacy of the audience. However, as Ivarsson and Carroll point out, ‘whatever the medium, the principle of maximum legibility always applies’.<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, throughout this discussion, it is clear that there are two main factors relevant to achieving successful subtitling: legibility and readability or simplicity. Strategies have been developed focusing on these two

elements, in order to provide suitable guidelines for subtitlers. First of all, let us look at legibility. To achieve legibility, subtitlers must focus on the appearance of the subtitles and the timing. With regard to the appearance of the subtitle, for languages that read left to right, the positional options are for text to be either centred or left-aligned. Historically, subtitles had always been centred, mainly due to the poor quality of television sets, which tended to be fuzzy round the edges. So, in order not to lose any of the text, they were positioned in the centre of the screen. However, as technology has improved and, so, presents fewer restrictions, today's convention favours more the left-aligned approach, as it is suggested that it is easier for the eye to focus on a new line if it begins in the same spot on the screen. In other words, the viewer is likely to read more quickly if his or her eyes are not continually having to dart around the screen to find the beginning of the speech. The position of the subtitle is something that can be accounted for when a programme is in its production stage, especially if the producers are aware that the production is going to be exported and, therefore, subtitled. In her guidelines for production, Josephine Dries suggests that 'since the subtitles usually cover the lower 15% (two lines) of the screen, care should be taken that the mouth of the speaker is slightly higher on the screen than it would normally be. Viewers focus on the moving part of the picture, i.e. the mouth in a close-up, which should not be covered by the subtitle'.<sup>7</sup>

As well as the position of the subtitles, the number and length of the lines appearing on screen at any one time must be taken into consideration. The general consensus is that two lines of subtitles should be the maximum to

appear on the screen at the same time. In fact, this point is included in the “Code of Good Subtitling Practice” developed by Ivarsson and Carroll for discussion at the ‘Languages and the Media’ conference in Berlin, October 15-16, 1998. Point 19 states ‘the number of lines in any subtitle must be limited to two’<sup>8</sup>. However, this is considered as the maximum limit not the preferred option. It is suggested, therefore, that ‘if it is possible to write the text of any one subtitle in a single line, it is usually better to do so’.<sup>9</sup> Of course, the medium for which the subtitles are intended will also have an impact on this, as the size of the cinema screen may justify having two lines rather than one. This, then, leads on to the issue of the line breaks. If there are two lines of subtitles, where should the break between them occur? Generally, one line of subtitle should have between 35-40 characters, which implies that a lengthier subtitle will need a break at some point. As such, one line is likely to be longer than the other. Here, there is a connection with the position of the subtitle on the screen, as discussed earlier. If the subtitles are centred, it does not matter which of the lines is longer, as the distant the eye must travel to look at the beginning of the second line will be the same either way round. However, if the subtitles are left-aligned, the eye will have much further to move if the first line is much longer than the second, in which case it is better for the first line to be the shorter of the two. This is clearly illustrated, by Ivarsson and Carroll, in the following diagram:<sup>10</sup>

e.g. Centred:

He said that he would not be able to come  
until tomorrow.

He said  
that he would not be able to come until tomorrow.

Left-aligned:

He said that he would not be able to come  
until tomorrow.

He said  
that he would not be able to come until tomorrow.

In either case, it is very important that the line break does not affect the meaning of the subtitle, by splitting the sentence in such a way as to alter the viewer's understanding of what is being said.

The typeface or font used for the subtitles needs, also, to be considered. Very ornate fonts are usually quite difficult to read whatever the medium, and, so, would be especially difficult in a subtitle format, particularly on the small screen. Also, text written in uppercase tends to be harder to read than text written in the standard lowercase and uppercase structure. Therefore, it is necessary, in order to enhance legibility, to make sure the subtitles are presented in a basic, simple font, in the standard lowercase / uppercase format. The use of italics is often introduced to denote a distant voice, a voice on the telephone or off screen, quotes or internal voices such as those

in dreams or flashbacks. As such, it is important that they are reserved for this specific use, in order not to confuse the viewer.

The colour of the subtitle on the screen will also affect its legibility, in comparison to the background on which it is set. Clearly, if the subtitle is in white and there is a lot of white or light-coloured background, the subtitle will not stand out sufficiently to be seen, let alone read. Likewise, the same would apply for black subtitles on dark or black backgrounds. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that the same level of darkness will appear in the background throughout the film. Therefore, one possibility is to place a box behind the subtitles to contrast against the colour of the text. However, the technology available to the subtitler or production team will determine whether or not this is a feasible option. As point 3 of the technical aspects of the “Code of Good Subtitling Practice” states, ‘in video applications, character clarity can be enhanced by a drop shadow or semi-transparent or black box behind the subtitles.’<sup>11</sup>

Finally, punctuation is a feature of the appearance of the subtitle that needs to be addressed, as it can easily distract the viewer and distort the meaning of the utterance. As such, it is best to keep punctuation to a minimum and to strike a fair balance between providing enough punctuation for the viewer to understand the meaning and providing too much for it to become a distraction. As an example, let us look at the following two sentences:

*“He said, “I can’t come ‘til 6 o’clock!”*

*“He said he can’t come until 6.00 pm”*

If we take into consideration the amount of time the subtitle is to remain on the screen, reading speed etc. then it is clear that the second sentence will be easier to read as the unnecessary punctuation has been removed and, therefore, does not cause a distraction. In some cases, however, it is necessary to include punctuation, for example, when two different people are speaking, which is often denoted by a dash “ – ” separating the two speakers. In essence, Luyken sums it up by saying ‘distractions such as complex sentences, abbreviations, unnecessary punctuation, incomplete sentences and ambiguities (unless reflecting ambiguity in the source) must be avoided’.<sup>12</sup>

The second area relevant to achieving legibility is that relating to timing. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to set fixed timings for subtitling, as there are a number of factors that can impact on reading behaviour, such as ‘the level of literacy of the target audience, the viewer’s degree of familiarity with the programme language, the genre of the subtitled programme and the pace of the visuals’.<sup>13</sup> However, firstly, in terms of the length of time one subtitle should remain on the screen, guidelines have been proposed suggesting that somewhere between one and seven seconds would be appropriate. Again, this will depend on the factors mentioned but also on the length of the subtitle, whether it is one or two lines, a short or a long utterance. In relation to this, Ivarsson and Carroll have suggested the following:

‘As a general rule, the minimum time for even a very short subtitle on a television screen is at least one and a half seconds and the maximum

time for a full two-liner should not exceed five to six seconds. A full one-liner should be kept on the screen for about three seconds, one and a half lines for about four seconds.’<sup>14</sup>

They, also, go on to comment that if a subtitle is left on the screen for too long, the viewer is then tempted to read it more than once, thereby destroying the sense of a flowing dialogue. On the other hand, if the subtitle is a short one, maybe a simple “yes” or “no”, that ‘could theoretically be taken off the screen after a mere half-second, the risk is high that the eye will not register it at all. For this reason, even the briefest subtitle should remain on the screen for about a second and a half’.<sup>15</sup>

After establishing a suitable length of time for the subtitles to appear on screen, another concept relating to timing concerns the amount of time that should be left between subtitles. Again, Ivarsson and Carroll explain how ‘experience shows that if subtitles are placed back to back without a minimal pause between them, the eye often does not register that a new subtitle has appeared, but remains fixed on some other part of the screen’.<sup>16</sup> Clearly, therefore, some sort of gap is needed for the viewer to subconsciously acknowledge that the subtitles have changed and new dialogue has been presented. Ivarsson and Carroll suggest that ‘to eliminate this problem it is recommended to leave approximately four frames or the equivalent of about one sixth of a second between subtitles, even when the dialogue is ongoing’.<sup>17</sup> This, inevitably, creates difficulties if the speech is rapid or if a dialogue between two people contains very short utterances,

which can undoubtedly be uttered faster than they can be read. It is possible to overcome this by borrowing time from the gaps that occur naturally within a programme. However, the main techniques used to combat this problem relate to ways of achieving readability.

All the constraints previously outlined will come together under the heading of readability and influence the decisions made by the translator. Clearly, it is here that the translator must consider ways to present the text so that it is readable, taking into consideration constraints such as reading speed and genre, but also bearing in mind the space available on the screen, the time the subtitle will be shown, the frame changes and all the other limitations on their translation abilities. In order to do this, there are two techniques used to achieve readability; one is by way of reduction and the other, by way of simplification, and it is here that we can look more closely at the implications of subtitling constraints on translation. Firstly, reduction can be achieved by simply using fewer words to render the same meaning. Given that we are dealing with interlingual subtitling, this technique could also be useful for any reference that lacks an equivalent in the foreign language. For example, if the term “metropolitan police force” were to appear in a dialogue, it would be unlikely to have an equivalent in other languages. Therefore, unless it was a key element of the story, it would be better to simply translate it as “police”, whilst at the same time adhering to the technique of reduction.

Another form of reduction is to simplify the syntactical structure of the spoken sentence. For example, if the spoken dialogue is given as “What time can we expect your son to arrive?” the subtitle can feasibly become “What time is your son arriving?” Or, sentences that begin with “Are we likely to...” can be simplified by rendering them as “Will we...”. This may well be a process that is imposed on the translator by the structure of the foreign language into which they are translating. But equally such sentences may represent a stylistic way of speaking, which would need to be rendered in the foreign language. Therefore, the translator would need to achieve a balance between maintaining the style but, at the same time, working within the constraints.

Merging short dialogues together can be another successful technique used to achieve readability. Let us look at the following dialogue:

- You need to fill in this form.
- OK.
- Then you have to take it to the issue desk.
- Right.
- You must have your passport with you, too.
- That’s fine.

It would be perfectly feasible to render this dialogue in the equivalent written form for subtitles as:

- You must fill in this form, take it to the issue desk and take your passport.
- OK.

In this way, the viewer can fully grasp the meaning of the conversation, and the instructions issued within it, without being distracted by the extra affirmations within the dialogue. Clearly, the more natural a conversation is the more likely it is for such extra utterances to occur and, as such, the translator will almost be in a position of having to summarise the conversation. For the purposes of subtitling, this would be quite acceptable as the viewer will still have access to the original voices, albeit in a foreign language, so can subconsciously add a “yes” or a “no” to their understanding of the dialogue.

Finally, the subtitler can take advantage of the visual element linked to the subtitles in order to delete certain parts of the dialogue that are, by and large, redundant. ‘Any information which may be gleaned from the actor’s performance ought not to be reproduced in the text.’<sup>18</sup> Again, this would particularly help if a cultural reference required a lengthy or complex explanation, but could quite easily be understood through the visuals. For instance, in a scene where two people are in a bakery discussing whether to buy a Danish pastry or a Bakewell tart, there would be no need for the subtitler to attempt to explain these references or try to translate them precisely, as the visuals would provide a more than satisfactory description.

Simplification, however, rather than making changes regarding the amount of text appearing on the screen, deals with the type or quality of text that appears on the screen. Firstly, the very fact that the medium changes from spoken to written when subtitles are introduced, will inevitably cause the loss of such aspects of speech as intonation. This can, to a certain extent, be rendered in the written format by way of punctuation. However, in subtitles, as has been mentioned, the inclusion of punctuation can affect the legibility of the text. Therefore, it is likely that these aspects will incur greater loss when a text is subtitled, rather than, say, translated in the book form, which allows for the inclusion of more punctuation and more explanation, for example, in the form of adding “she said in a surprised tone”. A common feature of simplification is, therefore, that marked language will be made more neutral or standard. In films and television programmes, this can have an important effect on the characters portrayed, as their speech could well be an intentional feature used to establish certain facts about the characters. This can be seen in a grammatical context, for example, where very formal or informal speech is used, perhaps, to convey the relationship between two characters, or where fairly ungrammatical speech is used to show that a character has had a poor education. These aspects, if maintained in the subtitles, would hinder the readability, and, therefore, the common practice is to convert them into more standard varieties of the language. So, a character with little education who uttered “I isn’t stupid”, would probably appear in the subtitled version as saying “I’m not stupid”, which would then suggest a higher level of education than was originally intended by the author, or, indeed, than other aspects of the

character would suggest. It would also lose the comic element of somebody trying to maintain that they are more intelligent or educated than people think, but doing so by using a phrase that is grammatically incorrect, in relation to standard variety norms. This would then create certain inconsistencies between the visuals and the dialogue.

Another type of language that tends to be standardised in the same way is that used within specialised genres, such as literary or technical language, which require some sort of prior knowledge, particularly if being read. This would occur, for instance, in the subtitling of medical or forensic programmes. It would be impossible for the subtitle viewer of, say, ER to follow what was happening if all the technical information were rendered in the subtitles. As it is, the majority of the listening viewers will no doubt not understand exactly what is being discussed, but grasp the gist. As such, it is necessary to ensure that the subtitles provide the same effect. Clearly, the disadvantage is that the reader will not have the impression of professionalism, technical expertise and realism if the staff of the ER talks about “blood pressure” rather than “BP”. Luyken points out that another reason for this standardisation could be to do with the customs of the country where the programme is to be aired. In the field of politics, he states that ‘highly emotional and emotive speeches might be the oratorical fashion in one country but be utterly repugnant to viewers in another.’<sup>19</sup>

Strong language is another type that tends to be toned down in subtitling or even not translated. The reasons for this could, in fact, be out of the

subtitled's hands, if censorship prohibits the rendering of swear words. However, it could also be the subtitled's own personal preference to tone down the bad language used within a script. The problem that occurs if strong language is toned down, again, relates to characterisation. There are countless films in which the "bad guys" use such strong language, and, in fact, it could be argued that the more swear words they use the nastier they are portrayed. So, in cancelling this effect out by neutralising the language in the subtitles, the traits of the character are altered, thereby perhaps making them appear less threatening and evil than they are intended to be. Another problem that exists, however, in this context relates to the acceptability of swear words in the foreign language and the implications of their use. For example, in Spanish, swear words are more frequently used than in English and, as such, have far less impact on the viewer than its English equivalent. Also, because the strength of different swear words varies, it may be difficult for the subtitled to gauge and therefore, the equivalent chosen may reflect either a stronger or weaker version of the original, again, affecting the overall impression for the viewer.

Similarly, another area where neutralisation commonly occurs is with the use of language reflecting social and cultural origins of the speaker; in other words, the use of dialects and accents. This tends to become the standard variety of a language in the subtitles, as it is very difficult for viewers to read a written dialect. The fact that most written publications are produced using the standard variety, as discussed in the previous chapter, means that viewers are accustomed to reading that variety. Therefore, if they are then

faced with a different variety, offering, perhaps, different spelling, grammar or vocabulary, it becomes more difficult and will take longer to read. So, for example someone in a film who says something along the lines of:

*“’e aint done nuffin’ yet!”*

is more likely to be portrayed in the subtitles as having said the equivalent of:

*“He hasn’t done anything yet!”*

This, again, can have an unwanted effect on the characters being portrayed, as the social implications associated with the way a person talks cannot be rendered in the written form. This is also especially difficult in the context under discussion, namely, interlingual subtitling, as the social implications associated with a dialect of one language, may not be the same as the social implications associated with the dialect of another language. As such, by rendering the subtitles in a dialect form of the target language, the subtitler may be associating an inappropriate set of social features with the character in question. However, if the storyline demands that viewers understand some sort of social differentiation between characters, it will be necessary to compensate for it in some way, and, as such, it may be better to accept that, whilst the two sets of social features are not identical, the idea of differentiation is being implied.

- <sup>1</sup> Baker, M. (ed.) (1998), *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Translation Studies*, London, Routledge, pp 244-245
- <sup>2</sup> Baker, M. (ed.) (1998), *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Translation Studies*, London, Routledge, p 247
- <sup>3</sup> Dries, J. (1995), *Dubbing and subtitling: guidelines for production and distribution*, Düsseldorf, European Institute for the Media, p 26
- <sup>4</sup> Luyken, G-M. (1991), *Overcoming language barriers in television: dubbing and subtitling for the European audience*, Manchester, European Institute for the Media, p 56
- <sup>5</sup> Dries, J. (1995), *Dubbing and subtitling: guidelines for production and distribution*, Düsseldorf, European Institute for the Media, p 33
- <sup>6</sup> Ivarsson, J. & Carroll, M. (1998), *Subtitling*, Simrishamn, TransEdit, p 39
- <sup>7</sup> Dries, J. (1995), *Dubbing and subtitling: guidelines for production and distribution*, Düsseldorf, European Institute for the Media, p 32
- <sup>8</sup> Ivarsson, J. & Carroll, M., *Code of Good Subtitling Practice*, Language Today, April 1998, p 20
- <sup>9</sup> Ivarsson, J. & Carroll, M. (1998), *Subtitling*, Simrishamn, TransEdit, p 76
- <sup>10</sup> Ivarsson, J. & Carroll, M. (1998), *Subtitling*, Simrishamn, TransEdit, p 77
- <sup>11</sup> Ivarsson, J. & Carroll, M., *Code of Good Subtitling Practice*, Language Today, April 1998, p 21
- <sup>12</sup> Luyken, G-M. (1991), *Overcoming language barriers in television: dubbing and subtitling for the European audience*, Manchester, European Institute for the Media, p 56
- <sup>13</sup> Ivarsson, J. & Carroll, M. (1998), *Subtitling*, Simrishamn, TransEdit, p 65
- <sup>14</sup> Ivarsson, J. & Carroll, M. (1998), *Subtitling*, Simrishamn, TransEdit, p 65
- <sup>15</sup> Ivarsson, J. & Carroll, M. (1998), *Subtitling*, Simrishamn, TransEdit, p 64
- <sup>16</sup> Ivarsson, J. & Carroll, M. (1998), *Subtitling*, Simrishamn, TransEdit, p 64
- <sup>17</sup> Ivarsson, J. & Carroll, M. (1998), *Subtitling*, Simrishamn, TransEdit, pp 64-65
- <sup>18</sup> Luyken, G-M. (1991), *Overcoming language barriers in television: dubbing and subtitling for the European audience*, Manchester, European Institute for the Media, p 56
- <sup>19</sup> Luyken, G-M. (1991), *Overcoming language barriers in television: dubbing and subtitling for the European audience*, Manchester, European Institute for the Media, p 158