12 Subtitling in Romania and Spain: A Contrastive Analysis

12.1 Introduction

It is a part of our daily lives, but apparently, it does not receive the attention it deserves, except from theorists and translators. Audiovisual translation is an activity that by means of film or television series changes our feelings, entertains and educates children with cartoons, or informs and instructs us with documentaries of all kinds.

The importance of audiovisual translation in society is fundamental, regardless the country or the method chosen to transmit the contents of foreign programmes, with dubbing and subtitling as the most common forms. They are practiced all over the world.

It’s difficult to decide which is the best method for transferring an audiovisual text, either dubbing or subtitling. On one hand, in many cases, the decisive factor for the election is not quality but cost. On the other hand, the social class to which the viewer belongs has an influence on the public’s preference for one or the other modality. That is why on the basis of political, cultural, economic or social reasons; each country chooses one of the two forms of translation mentioned above. However, in most countries both modes are used.

Theorists and translators also have their preferences and have provided reasons justifying one form or another. This has caused a historical clash between the two techniques because there are some academics and professionals who advocate one, but reject the other.

I will not get into this debate, although at the beginning of my studies, without knowing the theory of audiovisual translation, I had chosen the subtitling. At present, I am aware that both, subtitling and dubbing, have different functions and they meet the requirements of different groups of spectators. It is true, however, that many times the choice is taken considering the price and not the quality of the product that is offered to the viewer.

The motivation for this investigation stems from the desire of understanding the practice of audiovisual translation mostly used in my country, Romania. It is the subtitling method. There are several monographs and studies on subtitling practices based on countries in Western Europe, but very few on this practice in other countries, especially in East Europe. This is the first empirical study which presents results about the present process of subtitling in Romania.
12.2 Subtitling in Romania

Romania is one of the countries of former Eastern Europe, which is making use of subtitling as an audiovisual translation method, for both films and television. Whether for political or economic reasons, this type of translation has been mostly used as a tool to translate the avalanche of programs and films that have been made in the audiovisual field after the revolution of 1989. Although only a few years ago, in 2011, the deputy, Victor Socaciu, has proposed in parliament to change subtitling for dubbing as a way of protecting the national identity; his proposal was rejected by a large majority. The followers of subtitling insist on asserting that a film is conceived to be seen in its original language. They argue that emotions are transmitted to the viewer through the voice and intonation. Emotions cannot be transferred similarly via dubbing. Besides, professionals of this field, like Irina Nistor, claim that this change cannot take place suddenly because the public is already habituated to subtitling. Another factor is the fact that broadcasters are not prepared to deal with this change which involves significant costs, mainly by the need for specific training of professionals in the process of dubbing (Ziare.com, 2011).

In the book *Cine y Traducción*, Federico Chaume (2004) defines this modality in the following way:

Subtitling consists in incorporating a written text in the target language to the screen, where a film is shown in its original version, so that these subtitles coincide approximately with the interventions of the actors on the screen (Chaume, 2004:33). [my translation]

According to this definition, the foreign product to be subtitled requires considering three key components in this process: the oral word, image and subtitles. The set of these three elements, reading ability of the viewer and the screen dimensions define the basic characteristics of this type of translation. Thus, subtitles must be synchronized with the image and stay on the screen long enough so that, the viewer can read them.

Henrik Gottlieb (1997) is one of the first researchers who worked with subtitling and its procedures. In his book, *Subtitles, Translation and Idioms*, he contemplates subtitling from different perspectives, as for example history, experiments on the reaction of the viewer or translation of idiomatic expressions.

Limited by the space-time factors that the audiovisual media impose, the translation in this field is also subject to restrictions of various kinds. Furthermore, the subtitling involves a change of mode of discourse, oral to written, which usually forces the translator to omit elements of the original message. Many theoreticians understand the subtitling as an adaptation and not as a translation of the original text to the target text. But, it is imperative to take into account that, in this type of translation, delivered message is predetermined by the spatial and temporal
synchrony, which imposes certain limitations on the translator. In this case, the assertion of Díaz Cintas is very suggestive:

It is necessary to understand translation from a more flexible and diverse, less static perspective that accommodates a wide range of empirical realities, and take into account the changing nature of this practice (Cintas, 2003: 34). [my translation]

All these elements have to be well synchronised with the translation, subtitling or dubbing, to obtain quality of the final result.

Subtitling can be a challenge for a translator since the juxtaposition of the original text with the translated text may allow the viewer to make the comparison of both messages (Mayoral, 1993). This simultaneity of the two linguistic codes has consequences in the translated program or movie. However, the translator must remember that subtitling is a form of linguistic and cultural transfer, which operates at two levels simultaneously: the change from one language to another and the change from oral code to the written code (Gambier, 1996:10). In this situation, the translator must be aware of both aspects in order to offer the public an acceptable translation.

The strategy usually used by the translator is to transfer the terms of the original subtitles that conserve a close phonetic and etymological connection in both languages and can be easily recognized by the viewer when listening to the original dialogues. Thus, subtitling becomes a kind of ‘vulnerable translation’, as it was called by Díaz Cintas (2001), because it is exposed to criticism of the viewers who are often questioning the translator’s work.

Subtitling was practiced in Romania before 1989 due to sociopolitical and economic reasons. The dictatorship of the pro-Soviet regime and the situation of political isolation in the European market prevented the influx of foreign audiovisual products, and the few that penetrated the Romanian market were subtitled.

At present, although the Romanian audiovisual market is open, the habits acquired by the public and the economic precariousness of some TV stations have determined the existence of subtitling as a common method. The method represents a lower cost than dubbing. Just a single translator is needed.

Exceptionally, a linguistic reviewer is hired for correcting the translation. Television networks contact and hire professional translators with experience, since the product will always be translated and is going to have a wide social diffusion. This implies a greater responsibility for the participants in this process, for the entire chain, and therefore, in the end also for the translator.

To shed some light on the strategies and techniques used by subtitlers in Romania and in order to get to know the guidelines and conventions that are applied in the process of subtitling in this country, I have contacted a professional translator, Mr. Bogdan Stânescu. With his support, I will try to bring to light some unknown information well kept by the television networks, since Mr. Bogdan Stânescu was the only one who was so kind to answer my questions.
12.3 Conventions of Subtitling in Romania

As a starting point for their work, translators receive from the company that hired them – in our case, the television network – the dialogue list for the subtitling of foreign programs. The translator’s work begins at that moment, and she/he has to consider not only the words, but also the form of the subtitles, spelling conventions, the synthesis of information, rules of subtitling, such as reading speed, the whole set of unknown elements by the viewer, which require a perfect synchronization with the time of issuance of the dialogues for the translation of the text.

12.3.1 Form of subtitle and partition lines and subtitles

In Romania, subtitling is typically performed on two lines positioned in the lower part and centered on the screen. The maximum number of characters for each line used is 40.

When segmenting the subtitles, the translator has to note that these are, in themselves, logical information units. It is preferable to use subtitles of two lines that do not exceed 40 characters. That is easiest for the viewer. According to Stănescu, it is easier to read two short lines, than one line of 40 characters.

12.3.2 Orthotypographic conventions

The orthotypographic signs have the same use in almost all languages, but in the case of subtitling, the translators apply the conventions of each country in their translations (Cintas, 2003). Here are summarized some features that are granted to those ortotypographic signs by the person responsible for translating foreign films on the TVR1 national channel.

The comma and period are used for grammatical purpose in the target language, while the semicolon is never used in subtitles. The ellipses occupy three characters, and they are used to mark a pause or unfinished sentences. The dash is used to indicate two interventions in the same subtitle, always using the short dash. The type of quotation marks that are used are the double (‘ ’) and they are used to appoint famous quotes, titles and foreign words. Capital letters are used to mark titles, while italics are always used to indicate the narrator’s voice text. The numbers from 1 to 10 are written in letters while they are written in numbers from 11: for room numbers, addresses, days of the month, year, exact times, and measures. The point between numbers is used to mark thousands, millions and years. The abbreviations are used to mark units of measure, e.g., hours and if they appear in the original text, they are generally translated.
12.3.3 Synthesis of information: What is deleted from the original text?

According to Gottlieb, time and space are the key elements of subtitling: ‘the famous and infamous time and space constraints of subtitling [...] This normally implies some measure of condensation of the original dialogue, something that is often not expected in translated texts (Gottlieb, 2004:219)’. Timing has to be perfect, which implies that the translator is forced to resort to omission and reduce information in relation to the original text. Interjections are always deleted, i.e., they are never written in subtitles. Other elements that are sometimes suppressed, depending on the situation, are the vocative, adverbs and adjectives or words well-known to the audience, but if the message is abbreviated in the target language, the original referents should not be altered. In the case of repetitions, the translator can suppress a denial, for example, the replication: ‘No, we do not leave’ or, as another example, ‘No, no and no’; to translate this replica, it could be used as an equivalence ‘On no account’ or ‘No case’, always according to Stănescu. The first and last names of the characters, though they sometimes are omitted in the target text, they necessarily appear at the beginning, middle and end of the film so that if the viewer that has not seen the movie from the beginning he/she can identify characters by their name. Other sentential elements that sometimes can be suppressed are songs. Their translation has to be done as long as the lyrics is part of the plot of the movie. Generally speaking, about 40% of the original text can disappear. This figure may vary depending on the textual variety (Cintas, 2003:202). Condensation or conciseness requires prioritizing short words as they occupy less space on the screen. The translator has to know the list of synonyms and give the precise suitable word in order to prevent a distortion of the meaning or the register of the original sentence.

12.3.4 Spotting

Time and image are very important in subtitling; the viewer needs time to read the subtitles, but also to follow the thread of the film and the performances of the actors. The viewer’s attention must be shared among all these channels and codes. The maximum time needed for the subtitle of two lines remaining on the screen is 7 seconds and the minimum is 5 seconds (Cintas, 2003). When it comes to subtitles that have one or two words, the minimum time is 1 second. Temporal synchrony must be perfect among the entry of a subtitle and the beginning of its enunciation, but, our interviewee added: ‘We have to take into account that subtitling is performed manually and it also depends on the flair and professionalism of the person who is performing it’. Respecting these basic rules, the translator has to produce subtitles that are easily understood by the viewer in the brief time that they appear on screen (Ivarsson & Carroll, 1998:74).
12.3.5 Reading speed

The reading speed varies depending on each individual; therefore, it is necessary to establish a standard time for the subtitles to remain on the screen so that the viewer has sufficient time to read them. According to our data, in Romania, it is 7 seconds for a maximum of 80 characters (two subtitles each one of 40 characters), including spaces and punctuation. The standard application to measure the speed of reading is 10 characters per second, and the optimal measure is 15 characters per second, including spaces. The estimated time for reading and understanding a subtitle that is composed of two lines of maximum 35 characters or keystrokes per line, which means a maximum of 70 characters is 6 seconds. We note that there is a difference of one second between the estimated time in Romania and the estimated time by theorists like Ivarsson (1992), Gottlieb (1997), or Cintas (2003). For this reason, the guidelines guide us in our attempt to carry out consistent work, but nevertheless, they are open to changes and alterations (Cintas, 2003:119).

Through the information provided by Bogdan Stănescu, our interviewed translator, we have been able to determine in detail the guidelines and conventions of subtitles that are used in this country, especially in the TVR1 channel. We note that translators adapt their work to the conventions, although sometimes, either by a structural difference between the languages utilised or cultural restrictions, they are forced to use the techniques and methods that they consider convenient for each particular case.

12.3.6 Use of software

To perform the subtitle, the national television TVR1 uses a non-commercial program created especially for this institution.

12.3.7 Paratextual Elements

The delivery of the subtitle document is done in a text document (Word, Open Office), which includes the name and surname of the translator, the title of the work in original version and subtitled, and in the case where foreign elements are added to subtitling these are placed at the end of the document.

12.4 Comparison with the Conventions in Spain

In Spain, the mode used predominantly for the translation of foreign products is dubbing, nevertheless, some programs are broadcasted on television that also use
Comparison with the Conventions in Spain

subtitling. Despite the heterogeneity observed in audiovisual products you find in the market, the realization of subtitles is not random. It is a process that has to adhere to conventions that the translators have to keep in mind when doing their work. It can be for the simple reason that many broadcasters, distributors, or recording studios lack the style books that are offered to the translator as guidelines for submitting of the subtitles.

Generally the orthotypographic rules are similar for all countries, but their use is sometimes particularized in subtitling and the subtitles are configured depending on the foreign product that is translated into the target language, or depending on the translator who does the work.

The most updated exhaustive work on subtitling, and subtitling and conventions in Spain in particular, is the book *Teoría y práctica de la subtitulación*, by Díaz Cintas (2003), whose analysis will be used to present the characteristics of subtitles in Spain.

12.4.1 Form of subtitle and partition lines and subtitles

In Spain, the subtitles are presented in the same way as in Romania, using two lines centered in the lower part of the screen, with a variable number of 35 to 37 characters per line. Their segmentation is performed taking into account the units of logical information in which the target text is structured.

12.4.2 Orthotypographic conventions

In Romanian interrogative, and exclamatory sentences are marked with the appropriate sign at the end of the respective sentences, whereas in Spain sentences of this type are marked with conventional signs, both at the beginning and end of the sentence. That leads to the consumption of more screen space in Spanish. Díaz Cintas claims that no punctuation that fulfills a specific function should be omitted since it is a feature of the target language rules, but the subtitles should not be overburdened with punctuation marks that do not provide anything new and can hinder the reading by the viewer (Cintas, 2003:162). The accent is another orthotypographic sign that does not exist in the Romanian language, but in Castilian their use is mandatory both lowercase and uppercase, when appropriate, since the spelling of the subtitle has to be normative. Regarding the other punctuation marks, when comparing the conventions in Romania with the conventions in Spain, we observe the same use in Spanish and Romanian: for example, both languages try to avoid using the semicolon because it can confuse the viewer, since it is easy to associate this type of sign to a point and to consider the sentence finished.

The short script is often used to mark shifts of dialogue, the double quotes to mark appointments, invented expressions, literature and literary references, or to
mark the terms that are borrowed from another language. Italics are used to mark the voiceovers that come from people who are not on the scene, but it can be heard on radios, stereos, etc. The uppercase letter is currently used to mark the titles or the names. Unlike Romania, in Spain, long numbers like millions and billions are not transcribed with numbers, but with the equivalent words (million, billion) to avoid difficult reading to the viewer. When performing a comparison between the two models of subtitling: Romanian and Spanish, we can see that some orthotypographic conventions are different and vary in each country.

12.4.3 Synthesis of information: What is deleted from the original text?

The strict time-image relationship requires from the translator to make a synthesis of information to configure the subtitles. Thus, the reduction can be partial (condensation/conciseness) or total (elimination/default/deletion), but always bearing in mind the principle of relevance, and not omitting information that may be essential to the understanding of the history. Díaz Cintas affirms that, in a general mode, 40% of the original text will not disappear, and that this number may vary depending on the textual variety. It may seem that a large amount of information is suppressed, but this technique it is applied:

[... ] a large number of repetitions, exclamations, speeches parasites or words that play a phatic function and whose ‘loss’ does not have a negative effect on the mediation of semantic information (Cintas, 2003:203). [my translation ]

Condensation or conciseness is possible by prioritizing short words, as opposed to long words since those would occupy more space on the screen. The translator has to know how to use synonyms adequately for not distort the meaning or the registration of the original sentence. Every omission is a decision that can affect comprehension. That is why, the translator has to assess whether the viewer can access all information that is transmitted without too much effort. The elements that are usually ignored are phrases or expressions that are repeated in the original language. Sometimes, expressions that are easily understood are added by similarity in both languages. That is, references to people or places displayed on the screen or proper names, in the moment when it is considered that the viewer knows their identity. All these techniques must be used with caution, without producing a big difference between the original products and the subtitling. The translator has a fundamental role in this process. Like with all interpretations, quality depends on the intelligence, knowledge, artistic sensibility and determination of the subtitler (Ivarsson & Carroll, 1998:85).
12.4.4 Spotting

Another great responsibility of the subtitler is the reproduction of subtitles, respecting the basic criteria of linguistic cohesion. Therefore, a translator has to give maximum attention to the textual and discursive coordinates but, in addition, to the thematic coherence and to lexical cohesion of the subtitles. While respecting these basic rules, the translator must produce subtitles, which are easily understood by the viewer, in the short time that they appear on the screen (Ivarsson & Carroll, 1998:74). For this, he/she tries not to separate the verbs from their complements with the purpose to facilitate the reading and understanding of the viewer. If a sentence is the answer to a question, the ideal is that both appear in the same subtitle so that, a temporary pronounced lapse is avoided, which can hinder the understanding of the information transmitted. The phrasal verbs are changed by simple verbs. Thus, the translator gets more screen space for subtitles. As we can see, the translators in both Romania and Spain, adjust their work to conventions, but sometimes, either by a structural differences between the languages involved or because of cultural restrictions, they are forced to employ the techniques and methods they consider appropriate in each case.

12.4.5 Reading speed

The estimated time for reading and understanding of a subtitle which is composed of two lines (with a maximum of 35 characters per line) or keystrokes per line (which means a maximum of 70 characters) is 6 seconds. We can see that there is a difference of one second between Romania and the estimated time in Spain. The time calculated for reading is not always the same; for that reason, Díaz Cintas states that

Some companies may prefer a reading speed faster or slower over the whole program, or specific scenes and moments, and it will assign values slightly different to the duration of dialogues. We have to understand, therefore, as guidelines that guide us in our attempt to carry out a consistent labor, but simultaneously they are open to changes and alterations (Cintas, 2003:119). [my translation]

12.4.6 Use of software

Presently, in the market, there is a variety of computer programs that are used for subtitling. Among the free software programs, in Spain are used: Subtitle Workshop, Aegisub and VisualSubSync. The commercial programs, that stands out WinCaps, Spot, EZ Titles Fab and Swift (Ferriol, 2012: 39–48).
12.4.7 Paratextual elements

The delivery of the subtitled document is usually done in the file generated by the corresponding program of subtitling (Ferriol, 2012), and to a much lesser extent, in a text document (Word, Open Office), which includes the name and surname of the translator, the title of the work in original version and subtitled, as occurs in Romania.

12.5 Conclusions

By comparing subtitling conventions between Romania and Spain, this study showed that although the conventions are similar, there can be observed differences between one country and another. These differences are due to, especially, the guidelines the translators receive from the channels that transmit the product.

I take this opportunity to thank the translator Bogdan Stănescu for his unconditional collaboration. He let us immerse in the world of audiovisual translation in Romania, a discipline we consider to be essential in the field of translation in general. My sole purpose was to present some of the standards and guidelines that are used in audiovisual translation in Romania since there are very few studies on this topic.

I consider that my observations cannot be generalized, considering that we have enjoyed the cooperation of one translator, but we do not rule out other studies focusing on the same subject, encompassing more views of the Romanian professional translators.

References


Webgraphy
