Subtitling the film 'The children of Russia': enhancing understanding through a series of linguistic transformations.

La subtitulación de la película "Los niños de Russia": Potenciando la comprensión a través de una serie de transformaciones lingüísticas.

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Abstract:

This article analyses the subtitling of a documentary titled Los niños de Rusia.

It particularly identifies the linguistic transformations carried out to make the text more accessible to viewers. Changes such changing geographical descriptors, reducing the text and adding new information are performed to achieve this end.

Resumen:

Este artículo analiza la subtitulación del castellano al inglés del documental Los niños de Rusia e identifica las transformaciones lingüísticas que se llevan a cabo para lograr un texto de fácil comprensión para la audiencia. Tal proceso incluye cambios de descriptores geográficos, reducción e incorporación de texto.

Keywords:

Linguistics / Documentary / Subtitling / Textuality / Culture.

Palabras-clave:

Lingüística / Documental / Subtitulación / Textualidad / Cultura.

Summary:

Sumario:

1. Introduction.

Audio-visual translation is increasingly becoming a field of academic research within the field of Translation Studies. Previous studies in subtitling have focused their attention on the condensation that the text undergoes when transforming the aural medium into the written medium observing that time and space restrictions condition the number of words appearing on the screen.

The inevitability of this form of operation in subtitling has led some to believe that subtitling is simply an adaptation and reduction process that has little association with Translation Studies, but emerging academic research in the area is prove to the contrary (Assis 2001, Cordella 2006), Díaz 2001, 2003, Gottlieb 1994, 1997, Kovačič 1995, Kruger 2001, Mueller 2001, Orero 2004, Schröter 2003 to mention some). The argument I would like to put forward in this manuscript is that subtitling, when studied under a discourse analysis framework, can bring to the surface the process that has been undertaken to accomplish a specific *skopos* (Vermeer 1994, 2000) in the translation. It is expected that the information gained by this analysis will assist future professionals in making informed decisions in regard to the language choices available to them.

Knowing the set of language strategies available to professional subtitlers -when dealing with a text that requires both condensation and concomitant maintenance of the meta-message- is paramount to ascertain that the job is done effectively and efficiently.

This study investigates the documentary titled *Los Niños de Rusia* "The Children of Russia", directed and produced by Jaime Camino in Spain in 2001 and subtitled in 2003 by SBS Australia. This manuscript elaborates on and builds upon a previous study developed on this documentary (Cordella 2006) by paying particular attention to the successful transformations made to the text to enhance viewers' understanding of the report.

This historical report recounts the story of children sent to Russia by their families during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) as a way of protecting them from the miseries of the uproar of the time. It is estimated that 3,000

young children went to Russia by boat and many of them stayed overseas longer than anyone could have expected. Many returned to Spain in their adult life and their resettlement was not free of difficulties and personal hardships.

The film includes the personal accounts of 18 women and men from the Basque and Asturian regions of Spain who were interviewed at different times throughout the course of the documentary. Their narrations are accompanied with historical footages of the time rendering a Transfactual text II, following Gommlich's classification of translation texts (1993:175-184), which produces a powerful effect on the audience. Documentaries are particularly interesting to study because they have not necessarily been scripted allowing the natural speech of interviewees to emerge in the discourse. They are also usually addressed to a non-expert audience which is marked in the report by functions of persuasion and exposition (Agost, 1999, 30-40).

As previous studies have shown, the genre of the text and the potential target audience usually lead subtitlers in their decision-making process. *La Haine*, a French film which subtitles have been studied by Assis (2001), is a good example to illustrate the importance of having an audience in mind when working on subtitling.

Subtitles have been divided into intralingual and interlingual types. Intralingual subtitles are those in which the written text is the same as the aural discourse. In this case these subtitles assist the deaf community and provide a comprehensible text when the audio quality and/or individuals' pronunciation suffer from some deficiencies. Interlingual subtitles, conversely, transform the language of the original text into another language as it is the case of 'The Children of Russia' which transformation is from Spanish into English.

2. Research question.

This research aims to:

1. Study the transformations that take place in subtitling to achieve a comprehensible text that has undergone reduction/condensation.

2. Study the transformations that take place in subtitling to achieve a comprehensible text by adding new information to the original text.

3. Investigate how the illocutionary force of the original utterance is conveyed.

4. Investigate transformation of political local terms.

3. Method.

The corpus of this project is based on the interview material obtained from two women (i.e. Araceli and Josefina) whose contribution was prominent in the report. Their interventions were fully transcribed following discourse analysis transcript tools and a set of examples analysed in detail for the purpose of this work.

The data were collected by transcribing the aural discourse and writing down the subtitles that were simultaneously provided on the screen to compare both and determine the transformations that took place. In this study attention is given to the transformations that are successfully carried out in terms of maintaining the *illocutionary force* of the original text.

4. Analysis.

The main purpose of subtitling is to make the text accessible to general viewers who do not necessarily share the same culture and language background of the original text. Subtitlers' decisions are not purely based on the word limitations imposed on subtitling while attempting an equivalent meaning at a word or sentence level, but language choices are also modulated by particular ideologies that subtitlers may want to portray to the audience.

The analysis I shall present below comprises: the use of geographical locations; reduction/condensation of aural features and redundant features; the retention of the *illocutionary force* of the original discourse; and the addition of information to the written text.

4.1. Geographical locations and ideology.

Geographical locations may be identified in more than one way, and the particular form used in the discourse (in general terms) may convey particular ideas.

In the documentary the speaker identifies Euskadi as one the northern regions of Spain while subtitlers' preference is to use Basque Country. As follows I shall reflect upon whether this transformation misinterprets the original text, endorses particular ideological views and/or maintains the meaning of the original.

Euskadi is the name that locals give to the Basque country also known as Autonomous Basque Community, Vascongada provinces and Euskal Herria. Nevertheless, following the 'Estatuto de Autonomía del País Vasco' (Autonomous Statute of the Basque Region) both terms Euskadi and Basque region are used indistinctively. In addition, even if there has been a tendency to use Euskera to refer to the language, the use of the term Basque is also found in the Statutes of 'La Real Academia de la Lengua Vasca-Euskaltzaindia' (The Royal Academy of Basque Letters) -the official consultative body that regulates

the language [on-line information available at http://noticias.juridicas.com/base_datos/Admin/lo3-1979.tp.html][1].

Since transformations may have ideological implications I would like to explore whether the change from Euskadi to Basque Region carries a particular ideological load. It appears that nowadays there is a general tendency among some Spaniards to use both terms, nevertheless people from the Autnomous Community would prefer Euskadi to refer to their homeland.

The decision of transforming Euskadi into Basque Region then, can be interpreted as a strategy that aims at facilitating the understanding of a wider non-Spanish community while minimising the local political connotation embedded in the term Euskadi.

4.2. Transformations in subtitling: Reduction/condensation of aural features

The data of this study identifies the recurrent tendency in favouring a written style, in contrast to an aural one which correlates with previous studies in the area (Assis 2001, Kruger 2001). The following linguistic strategies were frequently used in this study:

4.2.1. Transformation: reduction of aural features

The natural vide-recording of this report and the unscripted version of the interviewees present a series of aural features typical of spontaneous and informal speech. The following features are represented on the screen:

avoidance of a) tag questions (e.g. *¿no?*, isn't it?), b) emphatic linguistic features (e.g. *claro*/of course/surely), c) sound mimics (e.g. dropping of bombs), d) connectors (e.g. *pues*, well), e) attention getters (e.g *fíjate*/look) and f) confirmation seekers (e.g *¿Cómo se dice?* How do you say it?, *¿verdad?* Isn't it).

Example 1 (below) shows the transformations that aural features have undergone in the written form. In this extract one of the characters, Araceli, remembers the time when she overheard her mother talking to someone about the Basque program that helped Spanish children to immigrate to Russia. Araceli, as a young child at the time, was very enthusiastic about the idea of going abroad and asked her mother whether she could go to Russia with her two younger siblings. Araceli remembers this event in the following extract.

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1 I am grateful to Dr Luis Martín-Fernández for this observation.

Example 1

> *Y entonces claro pues* a mí se me abrieron los ojos y yo a mi madre dije *"pues vamos allí madre" y tal y cual* "¿hija pero tú ya vas a poder con los chiquillos?" "sí vamos" dice *"pues venga"* ella valiente dice / yo era la que sabía escribir leer bien y todas esas cositas *¿no?* y entonces dice *"hala pues apuntáos venga pues ya allí pues ya"* como la Unión Soviética para nosotros era el paraíso terrenal *¿no?* y nos apuntamos.

When I heard that, my eyes lit up and I told my mother "We'll go there, Mum." She said "Will you manage with the two children?" I said "We'll go." And she said "Okay." I was the one who could read and write properly. So she said "Okay, go and sign on." **So we did.** For us the Soviet Union was like heaven on earth. So we signed on.

As we can observe from extract 1, a series of linguistic features that mark the spontaneity of the aural discourse are omitted in the subtitling (i.e. *y entonces claro pues, pues, y tal y cual, pues venga, ¿no?, hala, venga, pues ya*) .

The tag question *¿no?* -in English represented by a negative form of the verb 'to be' followed by a personal pronoun- was used twice in the text following a statement in: *yo era la que sabía escribir leer bien y todas esas cositas ¿no?* [Lit. I was one who could read and write well wasn't I?] and *la Unión Soviética para nosotros era el paraíso terrenal ¿no?* [Lit. the Soviet Union was for us like heaven on earth wasn't it?]. In both cases the use of the tag questions intends to corroborate and stress what Araceli has just said without intending to request confirmation of her speech.

Example 1 also shows avoidance in the use of emphatic aural features such as *claro* (of course/surely) and the connector *pues* (then) in addition to *y entonces claro pues* (and then well), *tal y cual* (this and that).

Similarly, aural features that mark a vernacular northern Spanish variety of the language (e.g. *hala* (well), *venga* (let's do it) are not represented on the screen.

Although aural features may be under represented in subtitling, in some instances this decision indicates an audience-centred approach which prioritises understanding above all.

4.2.2. Transformation: reduction of redundant aural features.

One of the first transformations that become apparent to the viewers is the length of the sentences on the screen. There is a tendency to prefer shorter sentences over longer ones to comply with the restrictions of the number of words allowed on the screen.

The following example illustrates how a sequence of utterances has been divided into five complete sentences making the text more accessible to an audience who is exposed, on the screen, to the atrocious massacre of Guernica. It also shows how stretches of small particles such as prepositions (e.g. de) are reduced

to a single particle on the screen.

Example 2

> *… fue la masacre más grande y más canallesca en un domingo **de de de de de de** ventas de las aldeanas con los niños y las mujeres que salían siempre domingo era como fiesta porque iban las compras y tal que ya machacaron pero cientos y cientos de niños y **de de** mujeres …*

> …It was the biggest and vilest massacre I've seen. It was on a Sunday, a market day. Women and their children went out to the Sunday market. Sundays were festive days. And that was when they massacred hundreds and hundreds of children and women…

As it has been shown in previous studies (Assis, 2001 and Krasovska 2004, Cordella 2006) sequential repetitions of small language particles such as prepositions and articles -which may be interpreted as false starts- are omitted producing a written version that is much clearer to the reader than the 'unplanned talk' (Cameron 2001) of an unscripted text.

4.2.3. Repetition: Keeping the illocutionary force.

The attention hitherto has been given to the reduction of aural features that mark the informality of the event. We now turn to the transformations used to both shorten the original version while maintaining the *illocutionary force* of the original discourse on the screen. First, I shall provide a definition of *illocutionary force*.

Austin (1962) classifies speech acts as: locutionary (the meaning of sentence or utterance), illocutionary (the force that a sentence or utterance has when used) and perlocutionary (the effect(s) the sentence or utterance has on the hearer).

The *illocutionary force* of a communicative act represents the force of an utterance when used. The intention of the speaker/writer is to convey a particular message which can be successfully decoded by the receiver whose interpretation assimilates the intention of the message-provider. Keeping the *illocutionary force* of an utterance then, is not a simple task when operating under time and space constraints.

It appears then that there is a clear benefit in identifying the *illocutionary force* of an utterance before attempting a subtitling as it helps subtitlers in their decision making process. The following examples (3-7) illustrate some of the language strategies used in this documentary to maintain the *illocutionary force* while working under the limitation of the subtitling. As it has been mentioned elsewhere (Cordella 2006) successful subtitling is achieved when both the original and translated text depict an equivalent force in the locution.

Example 3

> ***Cientos y cientos*** *de pioneros vestidos con su pañuelito y gritando / la banderita de España y todo eso.*
> **'There were many hundreds** of Pioneers with their scarves, screaming with their Spanish flags and all that'

In this example the repetition of the numeral cientos (hundreds) is transformed into an existential sentence including the structure 'there are' (in this example the past tense is used as in 'there were') followed by an adverb of quantity 'many' which substitutes the repetition and provides an equivalent *illocutionary force*.

Another strategy is to transform independent nouns from the same semantic field and select another verb (i.e. 'wonder' and 'happen') to convey a similar message from the Spanish original discourse as example 4 illustrates.

Example 4

> *Y ya había caído Bilbao y yo creo que lo más terrible de mi vida ha sido oír gritos y ver llorar a miles de niños cuando llegó la noticia de que Bilbao ya... ¿dónde están los **padres** las **madres**?*

Bilbao had already fallen. The worst experience in my life was hearing the screams and tears of thousands of children when we heard Bilbao had fallen and wondered what had happened to our **parents**.

Although it could be argued that by referring to two independent nouns from the same semantic field the narrator is emphasizing the extent of the tragic event through the identification of each child's guardian in the utterance (i.e. *¿dónde están los **padres** las **madres**?*, [Lit. where are the fathers and mothers]), the inclusion of the verb 'happen' and the possessive preposition 'our' in 'what had happened to our parents' instead of '¿dónde están los padres las madres' [Lit. where are the fathers and mothers] appears to compensate for the absence of two consecutive nouns (i.e. 'fathers' and 'mothers'). The inclusion of the verbs 'wonder' and 'happen' in '(we) wondered what had happened to our parents' imply that something has occurred and creates the uncertainty that the original version in the verb 'to be' (i.e. *dónde están* , lit. where are they?) portrays.

Similar transformations are achieved by selecting adverbs that denote stronger views than those expressed in the original to compensate for repetitions and speakers' prosody. This is the case of the adverb of quality *muy* 'very' which is transformed to 'extremely' as shown in example 5 below.

Example 5

> *En 44 regresamos a Moscú el viaje de regreso fue también **muy** duro.*
> In 1944 we returned to Moscow. The return trip was also **extremely** harsh.

4.3. Transformation in subtitling: Addition.

Although reduction occupies a central part in subtitling, there are some examples in this documentary where the translated text provides a longer version than the original one enhancing the comprehension. I present two examples to illustrate this point.

Example 6

*Nosotros salimos de Moscú ya con el **frío** cuando los alemanes estaban a dos pasos / nos sacaron fuimos en el tren.*

When we left Moscow the **cold season** had started. The Germans were just around the corner.

The noun *frío* (cold) is transformed into cold season to provide the scenery of the story and the year 1944 replaces 44 (Example 7) to enhance understanding to an audience who is reading the text on the screen.

Example 7

*En **44** regresamos a Moscú / el viaje de regreso fue también muy duro.*
In **1944** we returned to Moscow. The return trip was also extremely harsh.

4.4. Discussion.

The main focus of this article was to identify the linguistic transformations the original text went through to achieve a text that kept the illocutionary force of the original text. For this purpose the text was analysed following discourse analysis tools to identify the linguistic strategies and features used to achieve a 'successful' subtitling. The analysis reveals a series of strategies such as: reduction of informal features, inclusion of linguistic features, substitution of geographical descriptors (more widely recognised by non-Spanish population) and omission. In addition, some examples show the importance of conveying the *illocutionary force* of the original discourse by selecting compound nouns instead of independent nouns, inclusion of stronger adverbs to compensate for the speaker's prosody and repetition, change of verbs and sentence structures.

By identifying the language choices available to successfully carry out subtitling, professionals can take informed decisions as to which sentences to reduce, omit or include and this knowledge may help future professionals to gain a better insight into the profession and also reduce training time.

4.5. Conclusion.

The ultimate goal of subtitling is to be clearly understood by viewers who can be transported to another language and cultural reality -not necessarily experienced before- and still comprehend and enjoy the film.

It is expected that linguists working in the area of discourse analysis and subtitlers who have gained the experience on the job will come together to identify those language areas that require attention and would jointly make subtitling a sound discipline within Translation Studies.

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