

24 March 2010

RE: *Translating Regionalised Voices in Audiovisuals*

I am very grateful for your contribution that made the collection here attached possible, I hope you will be pleased to receive a copy of this volume at least as much as I was when the publisher delivered all of the contributors' copies to me at the end of February.

I hoped I could send you this copy immediately but a hectic end of term delayed this. I apologise for this slight delay and I hope the arrival of the volume today might partially compensate the delay.

I hope I will see you at future events of the series "Translating Voices, Translating Regions".

Once again many thanks for your contribution to the volume.

With all the warmest wishes,



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Translating Regionalised Voices in Audiovisuals

edited by
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Chapter 10

The Subtitling Triangle: Subtitling for Television, Practice and Technique

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1. The Subtitling Triangle

It is known in 20th century literary criticism that there are three major components that look at a work of art. They form a triangle, where the work of art is at the heart of the triangle, and at the top is the author, then the audience is on the left hand side, and the world is on the right side of the triangle (Abrams 1972: 4–5). By the same token the subtitler is at the

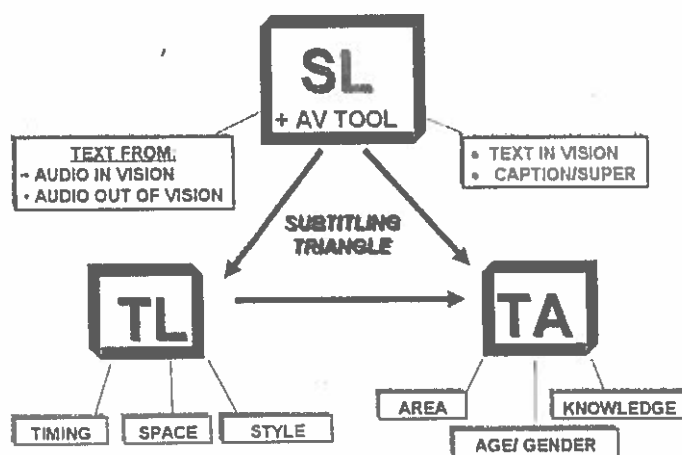


Figure 1. The Subtitling Triangle.

heart of the triangle (see Fig. 1), followed by 1) the source language alongside the audiovisual tool at the top of the triangle; 2) the target language on the left; and 3) the target audience (i.e. the viewer) on the right. Before discussing these three components of the triangle, I would like to elaborate briefly on the role and position of the subtitler who is at the heart of the triangle.

2. The Subtitler

The subtitler is often harshly criticized, particularly by bilingual audiences, for his/her 'loose' translation. They touch almost upon his/her lack of integrity and incompetence in the field, claiming that he or she misses a lot of information in the target text. The reason for this harsh criticism is that this audience is able to hear and at times see the source language on screen, and knows more about the source language than other groups of audiences. But this audience is unaware of the factors that limit the subtitler. Here I am not going to study the subtitler the way we do with the author or writer of a work of art, nor am I going to find out about his/her *experience, technical skill, background and knowledge of both languages*, the source language and target language. It is assumed here that these requirements are met by the subtitler when producing the work. This part of the triangle theory does not apply to studying the subtitler, the way it does to the author/writer of a work of art. Instead, here, I would assume what is called in 20th century literary criticism "the death of the author" (i.e. the death of the subtitler) – and therefore the focus here is to discuss the restricting factors that shackle the subtitler. So, there are three components in my triangle theory of subtitling (most of which can be applied to voiceover scripting as well): the source language alongside the audiovisual tool at the top of the triangle, the target language and the target audience at the bottom. That is to take into consideration the visual information from the audiovisual tool, along with the transcription or source text. Unlike paper translation the latter two complement each other. The subtitler must focus on those components to achieve a good product.

3. The Source Language, plus the Audiovisual Tool

The first component of the triangle is the source language alongside the audiovisual tool. In this form, there are three types of sources: the

transcription or description of the verbal message (as used for the hard of hearing where the subtitler is given a text with description of the action on screen, like *footsteps* or *a door opens*), the visuals and the audio. The transcription is either a text on screen or text transcribed from an audio, as shown at the top of the Subtitling Triangle in Fig. 1. The text transcribed from the audio is usually shorter and more succinct than what is being heard or said, by an actor talking in front of the camera, or behind the camera. The reasons for the source text being shorter than the full transcription are to be discussed later in this article.

The other type of text is the one on screen, registering information for example from placards, road signs, shop signs, even from captions, or so called 'supers' – like the name and title of a talking head/interviewee. This second type of source text is often literally copied from the screen, meaning no editing to the source text was done due to timing, and is therefore to be translated fully, no editing or shortening in the target text permitted.

4. The Target Language

The second component of the triangle is the target language. Under this heading there are three main factors: the timing and space of the image on screen, the prescribed technical style and the linguistic style of the target language, as shown in Figure 2.

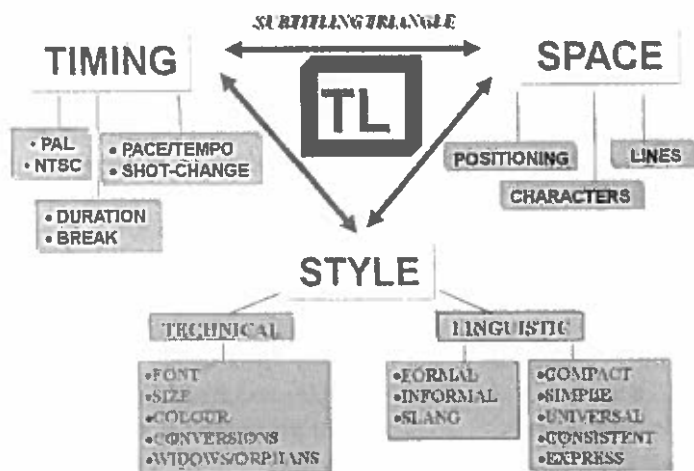


Figure 2. The target language in the triangle.

With timing, technically speaking there is either PAL or NTSC (PAL is a mainly European video system and NTSC is a mainly American system). These two systems partially indicate the number of frames or pictures used in one second of duration, and generally speaking there are either 24/25 frames or 30 frames per second. The other issue in timing is the minimum/maximum duration of the text on screen. This duration varies but is not often less than one second, as the viewer needs time to read the subtitle, and not more than 7 or 8 seconds otherwise the viewer assumes that the subtitle is left on screen much longer by mistake. Also the break between subtitles is essential, it should not be too fast for the eye of the viewer to notice, and it is often 3 to 4 frames or pictures, unless it is a chapter break as happens on DVDs where the break is much longer. The third issue in timing is the pace of the film; in an action-packed film, the duration of the subtitle is certainly affected and makes the target text get shorter and shorter. One final issue in this main element about timing that restricts the target language is the controversial "shot-change"; this issue mainly applies in my view to action-packed film and does not strictly apply to documentaries. "Shot-change" means that when people are talking on the screen, for instance, and the image changes to a panoramic landscape, some subtitlers/companies or clients think that the subtitle should disappear earlier, 3 to 4 frames before its audio is finished. I feel that this procedure does not strictly apply to documentaries as the pace is slightly slower and more rhythmical than that in action-packed films.

The second main factor that affects the target language is the space on the television/cinema screen. With the space available you can position the subtitle either at the top of the screen, on the right or left of the screen, as in Japanese and Chinese languages, or at the bottom of the screen. The target text is here either right-aligned (as in European languages), left-aligned (as in Semitic languages such as Hebrew and Arabic), or centred. As for the characters or letters, they are to be around 37 or 38 letters including spacing between the words (but the space of 42 characters/units for Arabic and Hebrew due to the size and volume of letters in these two languages). The lines vary in number ranging from one to three lines of text in one subtitle on the screen.

The target language is also affected by style, which is the major fundamental element in subtitling. For style we intend both the linguistic style of the subtitle on the one hand and its technical style, which stipulates how it appears on screen, on the other. The technical style includes the specifications of the target text, namely the type and size of font used, the colour of the text as in the case of a script for the hard of hear-

ing, the metric/imperial conversions or the equivalents of military ranks depending where the viewer or the target audience is located. We know that metric measurements are used in the Arab world, for instance, whilst imperial measurements are used in the UK; these conversions are to be approximate in order to facilitate transferring the message across easily to the target viewer/audience. The issue affecting the technical style is what I call 'widows/orphans', a term known in formatting a word document in word processing. This widows/orphans issue requires from the subtitler the skill of not splitting a phrase or clause in an awkward place and then putting the second half of the sentence either on the second line of a subtitle or even clumsily on the following subtitle. The reason being that the target viewer/audience would not have a chance to go back and see what was being said. It is one-way street, as it were. This issue brings to mind the Reader Response theory, that aims to describe the reader's contact with text and the author, in particular about the reader's judgement after the 1st reading of a poem and then his/her judgement after the second reading (cf. Iser 1980).

According to the Reader Response theory the reader understands the poem or the work of art differently after the second reading, compared to one's response to it in the first reading. With subtitling, the viewer has only one chance to read the text, or only the 1st reading of the subtitle, unless the subtitles are recorded on a DVD where the reader/viewer can pause the audiovisual material in order to grasp each and every subtitle, one at a time. So, the subtitler should make sure that each subtitle almost stands on its own as one entity and not essentially reliant on the previous or the following subtitle. Another major issue is the linguistic style of the subtitle. This can be formal as in a documentary film, informal as in an action-packed film or a children's tv series, or slang as in subtitling the lyrics of a popular song, written originally in slang. The style needs to be short and compact linguistically, simple using monosyllabic words and phrases, universal and not restricted to a certain group of people, unless the audiovisual material is for a highly specialised audience, for instance a medical team, and therefore the style is localized. Another linguistic requirement is to be consistent and expressive; for consistency we intend for instance using a term consistently throughout a film/AV material without changing it half way through the film into another term. For expressivity, it must be intended that the subtitler needs to be more elaborate; for example, when an actor says "this", the subtitle should say what is meant by the demonstrative pronoun: if 'this' is referring to a car, a book, a case or even a statement. This approach avoids ambiguity in the target text (for further readings on ambiguities, see Khuddro 1997: 118–130; 2000: 31–37).

5. Target Audience/Viewer

The final point I would like to make in this article concerns the target audience/viewer (see Figure 3). This component is also vital and affects the subtitling process. In the target audience a further three factors play a major part in the subtitling process: the geographical area of destination, the age and gender, and the knowledge of the audience. The area factor is significant in that you need to know how the subtitle is to be consumed globally, regionally or just locally. When it is globally consumed, no regional or local expressions or terms can be used. When it is for a particular target audience in the Middle East or the Gulf, for example, then some regional terms might be applied, to make the target language as close as possible to the everyday language used in that region. Even the term "Persian Gulf" well-known in English, is known in Arabic only as the "Arabian Gulf", i.e. traditionally known by the latter in the target language. Here the subtitler is adopting a diplomatic approach, otherwise he or she is to be ignorant of Arabic culture. The Caspian Sea, for instance, is also known in Arabic as the Kizween Sea. Another example of diplomacy/mediation is the term "continental breakfast" in a UK hotel; it obviously means a breakfast offered in mainland Europe. So, "the continent" here in the UK means "mainland Europe", as if the UK is not part of Europe. The same can be said about the term "overseas students" meaning "foreign students". Here, the subtitler/translator wears the hat of a mediator or diplomat, in order not to insult the audience's intelligence. It is a form of 'compensation' as Harvey (1995: 65–86) calls it. Here is a good example:

a relatively stable Iraq would have all the cards necessary to emerge as a major player in the Persian Gulf, where Saudi Arabia and Iran are competing for leadership.

فالعراق المستقر نسبيا ستكون لديه جميع الأوراق الضرورية للظهور
كلاعب رئيسي في الخليج العربي حيث...

...a relatively stable Iraq will have all the necessary papers to appear as a major player in the Arabian Gulf where.... [back translation]

The following is another example how to transfer the meaning but you are limited with the space on screen is this. In a news item about a world record breaker, published in *Metro* November, on the 14th November 2008:

In New Zealand, contestants rushed to be the fastest to peel and eat three kiwis – fruits, that is.

كمن النيوزيلنديون، الكيوي، تباروا على السرعة في تقشير واكل ثلاثة
 من فاكهة الكيوي طبعاً.

New Zealanders, the Kiwis, competed about their speed of peeling and eating three – of the fruit, of course. [back translation]

It is the humorous meaning implied in the source text, that is hard to convey, and a form of ‘compensation’ is needed, as the humorous connotation of the word ‘kiwi’ is known to UK readers but not to non speakers of English.

The same can be said when the target audience is from one specific country or the subtitles are for a local community or ethnic group in London, for instance, where the information they are receiving is related only to those living in the UK. Here the message does not change, only language or lexical choices change; the language should be standard in order to be understood by all Arabs and Arabic-speaking people in the Arab world (22 countries in total) and all over the globe (using the equivalent of what is called in English ‘the Queen’s language’ – the one understood by all Commonwealth countries and not just by the UK).

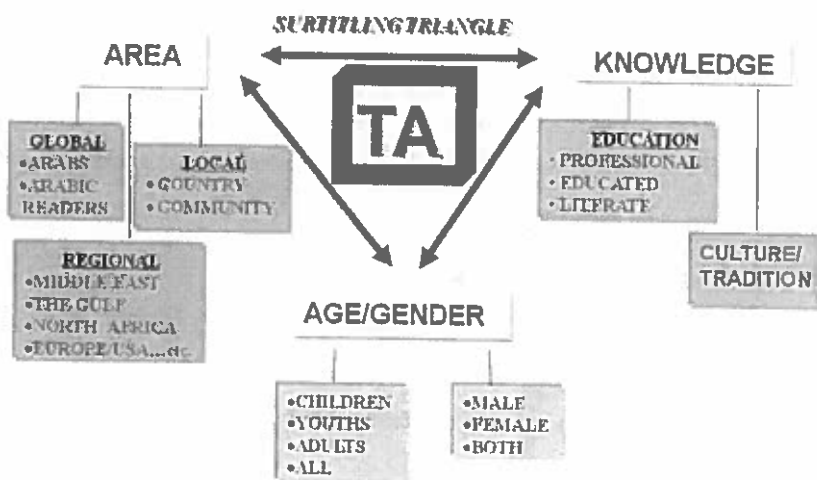


Figure 3. The target audience.

Other vital factors are the age and gender of the audience: whether they are children (as in the case of translating a cartoon film or series) or youths and teenagers (as this factor affects the choice of words, not too be complicated or highly technical), or the target language is for adults, and in this case only the choice of vocabulary is vast. Also when talking about subjects that are gender-related like prostate cancer or breast cancer in a health programme or female cosmetics (e.g. lipsticks and blushers) in a Body Shop show, it is important to know how to use the pronoun 'you', since Arabic and indeed some European languages (apart from English) differentiate between the male or female 'you'. So the pronoun 'you' here only refers to either male or female, and not to both, due to the nature of subject. The final factor in the target audience is what I call knowledge¹ and that can be split into two branches: the first is the culture and tradition of the audience addressed and the second branch is the education of the target audience. For example, if the characters are medical staff, as in the series ER (a tv series set in an A&E department of a hospital), a highly technical language is used but needs to be simplified as much as possible for the non-medical audience. This is especially true when creating Arabic subtitles, as there is a significantly high percentage of illiteracy in the Arab world, particularly among women.

6. Implementation of the Subtitling Triangle

I feel it is time to see an example that illustrates the subtitling impact of all the issues or factors discussed in this article. The following sentence is a text in vision on screen in the source language. It is a sign displayed under a phone on a wall of a hall:

This phone is for guest emergency assistance only.

هذا الهاتف لمساعدة نزلاء الفندق في الحالات الطارئة فقط.

Hazha el-hatef li-musa'adati nuzala' al-fondoq fi el-halat attari'ah faqat. [transliteration]

This phone is for helping customers of the hotel in emergency cases only. [Back translation]

There are several elements to consider. The source text above is in vision. The audiovisual tool indicates that this sign is in the foyer of a ho-

tel. Linguistically, the word “guest” is problematic in the target language, as here it means ‘customers’ and not ‘guests visiting the customers’. The linguistic style is formal. With regard to the space, the number of words used in the source text is 8 words or units and there are 9 units in the target language. The duration is ideally one second plus 2 frames per unit, so the total duration should be one second and 18 frames, but here the rule of the shot-change is vital, so that the target text is not to be left on screen after the image of the sign has disappeared from the shot.

The position of the target text is either at the bottom of the screen, or at the top of the screen in order not to mask the actual sign. The number of lines is two and not one as there are 56 characters/letters including spacing in the target text; and as the TV screen accepts up to 42 characters including spacing; so splitting the sentence into two lines is a must, and the sentence should be split either at the word/unit “for” in the target text (in Arabic) or at “in emergency cases only”. The target text needs to be centred and positioned at the bottom of the screen. This sign is obviously for both men and women, and it is for ALL guests young and old; and the sign needs to be globally understood by Arabs and Arabic-speaking readers, so the style has to be formal.

This phone is for guest emergency assistance only.

هذا الهاتف // لمساعدة نزلاء الفندق // في الحالات الطارئة فقط.

This phone is // for helping customers of the hotel // in emergency cases only.

[back-translation]

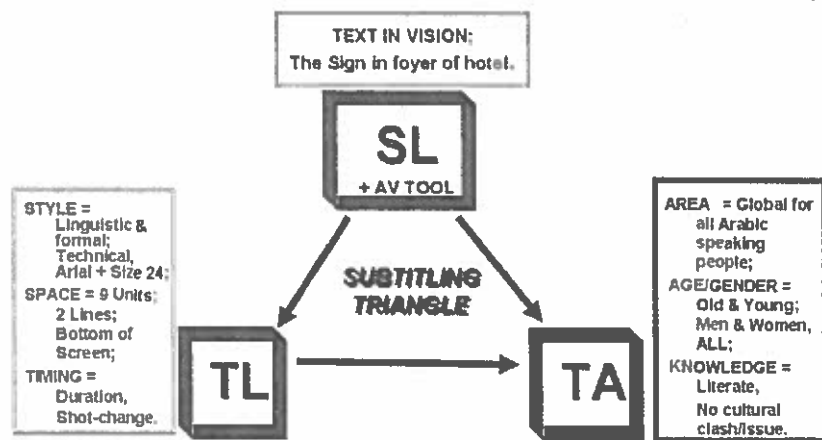


Figure 4. An example of the theoretical framework in practice.

It can be added, moreover, that many of the factors discussed in relation to subtitling – except for the layout, the technical style and the space in the target language – are certainly applicable when preparing a target text for a voiceover session – i.e. the target language is also limited by the timing, the linguistic style and the type of target audience. However, due to the restrictions in scope of this contribution, I am unable to shed any light on voiceover translation in this article.

Notes

- ¹ [Editor's note] For a full discussion of this type of knowledge, also described as *shared knowledge*, we could refer to its definition in N. ARMSTRONG. 2005. *Translation, Linguistics, Culture: a French-English Handbook*. Clevedon/Buffalo, NY: Multilingual Matters.

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