Narratology and audiovisual translation

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Introduction

The term narratology was coined by Todorov (1969: 10) to designate an emerging discipline envisioned as the ‘science of narrative’. Narratology, however, has come to be perceived as a ‘humanities discipline’ that articulates concepts and models ‘widely used as heuristic tools’ for the study of narrative (Meister 2014). Originally oriented towards the study of literary texts, many of narratology’s analytic advances have proven useful for narrative film analysis, including translation research driven by the insight that ‘the reason for making a film is to tell a story’ (Zabalbeascoa, Izard and Santamaría 2001: 109). The present chapter begins by exploring the classical concepts of narratology as developed in literary theory, before proceeding to consider to what extent such concepts apply to audiovisual narrative. The bulk of this chapter then examines the relevance of narratology to the study of audiovisual narrative in translation, and discusses a variety of narratological insights that bear on narratives conveyed across media, subtitling, dubbing and audio description: action, plot, narration, description, narrativity, focalization and characterization. The focus is on narrative film fiction, that is, narrative films about a fictional story world.

Basics of narratology

Narrative is often defined as a communication form among other existing forms—such as ‘descriptive’, ‘argumentative’, ‘explanatory’ or ‘instructive’ communication (see e.g. Chatman 1978, Fludernik 2000, Herman 2008). The identity of narrative communication among the other forms mentioned, claims Ryan, ‘resides on the level of the signified’ (Ryan 2004: 8), that is in the kind of meaning that is communicated. A text is narrative, from this perspective, if its meaning is to ‘create a world’ and ‘populate it with characters’; if that world and characters ‘undergo changes of state’ caused by ‘accidents’ or ‘deliberate actions’; and if the text—understood here in a broad, cross-medial way—produces in the reader or audience an interpretation of that world in terms of ‘goals, plans, causal relations, and psychological motivations’ (ibid.: 8–9). A narrative, in this sense, is a text about a world with a plot, that is with ‘events and characters’ actions’ arranged in ‘causal and temporal patterns’ (Kukkonen 2014).
Following this line of thought, Quentin Tarantino’s feature film *Pulp Fiction* (1994) is narrative communication because it is about a world (and it is moreover narrative fiction as it creates that world) and features (brutal) characters such as the hitmen Jules (Samuel Jackson) and Vincent (John Travolta) and their boss Marsellus Wallace. Also, throughout this instance of narrative communication viewers are presented with a multitude of actions—as when, early in the film, Jules and Vincent kill a pair of young, out-of-their-league suburbanites for reneging on a deal with Marsellus; with plenty of accidents—as when Jules and Vincent happen to be present at a diner held up by two amateurish robbers; and with many dramatic changes of state—as when Jules and Vincent miraculously escape being killed themselves, leading Jules to think things over and announce his imminent retirement from gangster life. Audiences try to make sense of the narrative in terms of chronology (which is not so easy, given the film’s non-linear structure), goals (the purposes of gangsters and others), causal relations (accidents and plans), and psychological motivations (e.g. desired retirement from gangster life). The focus of Ryan and others on the signified of narrative communication therefore involves the analysis of the story worlds, the characters and their motivations, and the chronology and causality of actions, states of affairs, dramatic changes and coincidences.

Since Russian Formalism, however, narratology has time and again stated that a narrative is not just an evolving story world (i.e. a related series of situations, actions and events lived by characters), but also, and fundamentally, the gradual communication—sign after sign—of that story world to the audience. Cohn (1990: 777) usefully lists the various terms used for this distinction, although each of them may have slightly different connotations for each narratologist (Vercauteren 2012: 212–5). Terms frequently used to refer to the action world are fabula (Russian Formalism), ‘story’ (Chatman 1978), ‘story world’ or ‘story logic’ (Herman 2002), ‘the told’ (Sternberg 2009: 460), ‘intradicetic world’ (Genette 1972), ‘action logic’, or just ‘actions’ and ‘events’ as part of the ‘plot’. As said, the inferable causality between events is considered an important logic here. Bordwell, for example, defines the fabula as ‘the story’s state of affairs and events’ but also as the ‘spatio-temporal realm in which the action unfolds in chronological order’ (2008: 98, 110). The inferable causality between events is also considered an important structuring principle (Ryan 2004: 8–9), hence the term ‘action logic’—which has ties with the philosophy of action (see Doležel 1998) and cognitive science (Schank and Abelson 1977, Sternberg 2009: 485). Terms frequently used to refer to the communication of the story world are the sjuzhet (Russian Formalism), the ‘telling’ (Sternberg 2009), the ‘extradicetic communication’ (Genette 1972), the ‘narrating’ (Prince 1982), ‘narration’ (Bordwell 1985), ‘discourse’ (Chatman 1978), and ‘text’ (Bal 1985).

Narrative theorists including Sternberg (1978, 2010) and Bordwell (1985, 2008) argue—against positions such as Ryan’s—that narrative communication cannot be adequately characterized by privileging the signified, however named and defined (whether event, fabula, plot, or so forth). Bordwell (2008: 110), for example, notes that ‘we have access to the fabula only by means of narration’, which means that ‘narration isn’t simply a window through which we watch a pre-existing story that we might see from elsewhere’. Instead, narration is ‘the very force that conjures the fabula into being’ (ibid.). As Sternberg has shown, Bordwell (2008: 100) argues, narrative concepts ‘must be gauged in relation to their capacities to create distinctive effects on the perceiver. For example, a flashback isn’t just an abstract rearrangement of story incidents. Its function is to trigger interest in finding out what led up to what we see’. The telling (or narration, or discourse) is emotionally crucial here, if we understand this term as how a story world and its characters are gradually communicated to the reader or audience.
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*Pulp Fiction* equally illustrates how narration—conspicuously non-chronological in this case—is not an abstract theoretical structure but the very communication process that enables the production of narrative effects. First, consider the film’s opening, the initial diner scene (Filmography: ‘Nobody ever Robs Restaurants’ clip). This scene is the beginning of the film discourse but not the beginning of the story (or *fabula*, or plot). Whereas some films narrate their story *ab ovo* (‘here is character A, and here is what next happens to A and why so’), *Pulp Fiction*’s filmic narration has an *in medias res* quality (‘here is what is happening to characters’): the characters are unknown to the viewer, and so are their precise circumstances, yet we plunge in the middle of the action. The narration has the camera on a young couple, Pumpkin (Tim Roth) and Honey Bunny (Amanda Plummer); it registers their conversation (they suddenly come up with the idea of robbing the diner) and the start of their improvised action (they start shouting and pointing guns). The communication then freezes the images in mid-action, superposes the title sequence on the frozen images, and lets a furious guitar riff kick in. The film narration thus triggers questions—narrative knowledge gaps—yet leaves them unanswered for the time being. Who are these romantic robbers? Will they get away with their violent behaviour? Given their degree of improvisation and violence, will something go horribly wrong for them or other clients? These are central narrative effects—‘curiosity’ and ‘suspense gaps’—impossible to explain without reference to the narration, that is to how and when aspects of the *fabula* are disclosed (the improvisation, the start) and withheld (the outcome).

Consider now the end of the film narration, i.e. the final diner scene. Here the audience watches Vincent and Jules reflecting on life—their own good fortune, divine intervention, and the relative cleanliness of pigs and dogs. Although the camera is on the gangsters throughout the scene, much of the not-so-busy diner is seen in the background. A new narrative effect, ‘narrative surprise’, is produced when the registering of their dialogue is briefly interspersed with a shot of an action that the viewer had already seen from another angle in the *in medias res* beginning of the film—namely Pumpkin shouting ‘Garçon! Coffee!’ to the waitress. The diner that formed the décor of the opening scene, it now transpires, is much like the diner where Jules and Vincent are talking about pigs and life. The audience is suddenly able to anticipate what the amateurish robbers are about to do; and it realizes that Vincent and Jules—who have been thoroughly characterized as ruthless killers by virtue of their actions throughout the film—are among the other clients. The suspense of this narrative situation could not have been attained early in the discourse. The narrative power of discourse-story interaction is fully appreciated at this point, and further exploited in the scene. The opening and final diner scenes of *Pulp Fiction* thus illustrate suspense, curiosity and surprise.

The examples also show how these ‘big three’ narrative emotions (Bordwell 1985: 101) depend on specific discourse-story interactions: (i) chronological or noticeably delayed communication of future action causes suspense, as dominantly in thrillers; (ii) noticeably delayed communication of past actions causes curiosity, as dominantly in detective stories; and (iii) *un*noticeably delayed communication of critical information causes surprise when that information is finally disclosed. As for (i), Sternberg (1978) adds that narration, especially in fiction, can enhance suspense in artful or ‘aesthetic’ (i.e. less synchronous or ‘mimetic’) ways by artificially delaying the communication of the action development. A ‘cliffhanger’, as illustrated by *Pulp Fiction*’s opening scene, is the creation of narrative suspense by stopping the communication in mid-action. As for the difference between (i) and (ii), ‘suspense derives from a lack of desired information concerning the outcome of a conflict’, while ‘curiosity is produced by a lack of information that relates to the narrative
past’ (1978: 65). Who are these people? What background do they have? In what situation are they? How have they landed in such a situation? As for (iii), ‘narrative surprise’ differs from (i) and (ii) because it does not signal a gap or suppressed information (e.g. the fact that the two amateurish robbers are there with Jules and Vincent), so that the sudden disclosure throws new, surprising light on the narrated world. The more these narrative effects dominate our response to a text, the higher the text’s narrativity as a ‘felt quality’ (Porter Abbott 2014).

Two more heuristic concepts should be added at this point: ‘characterization’ and ‘focalization’. As for characterization, Aristotle’s famous idea that a tragedy, or perhaps a narrative in general, consists mainly of characters and plot, with the greatest weight on plot, requires qualification in two ways. The most classical objection is that some narratives are more plot-driven, with characters as servants, while others are more character-oriented, with some plotting as a servant. As Remael and Vercauteren put it (2007: 79), ‘some films are driven by character, some by action’. Less classically, yet no less importantly, the narrative meaning of a character depends on ongoing characterization in discourse, much like the narrative meaning of plot, or the narrated action, depends on its narration, or discourse. Characters are not just ‘what they do’ (Aristotle paraphrased by Cattrysse and Gambier 2008: 48), but what they appear to be and do at time t in the discourse. The unfolding characterization—narration’s twin, the gradual disclosure of character traits—fully interacts with narrativity: since narrativity is about ‘framing and testing hypotheses’ as triggered and constrained by the film discourse (Bordwell 1985: 37, 39), characterization is involved as it steers hypothesis formation about possible actions, intentions, evaluations and emotions of characters. At the end of Pulp Fiction, for instance, we are much more interested in the dénouement of the diner scene because at that point we know something about the robbers (their amateurism and improvisation), we know much about Jules and Vincent (they are professional killers, though one has an identity crisis and is thinking of retiring). As a result, we suspect trouble for the robbers, yet we do not know what is about to happen.

Focalization, for its part, was coined by Genette (1972) as he realized that literary ‘perspective’, if left unanalyzed, creates confusion between two very different questions: ‘Who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective?’ and ‘Who is the narrator? ’ (1972: 241). Genette called the former kind of perspective ‘focalization’, while the latter kind refers to the ‘narration’. A narrator can tell (parts of) a story focalized through the minds of several characters, or through her own mind as a kid, to give but two examples. Bal (1985) argued next that there are basically two ways in which the narration (or narrator) can select or filter story-world information for the audience: the narration can provide audiences with information not filtered by a character, or it can suggest that it restricts the information to what a character is perceiving in the story world. In more technical terms, Bal’s proposal is that ‘a focalizer can be either “external” (a narrator) or “internal” (a character) (ibid.) and ‘most narratologists today follow’ this view (Jahn 2005). In this model, Genette’s two types of literary narrative perspective, i.e. narration and focalization, are thus related in the following way: the ongoing narration of a story world (i.e. the speech acts delivered by the narrator) can choose a certain focalization (i.e. by adhering to the perspective of a narrator and/or characters). Moreover, it can choose to explicitly signal or leave implicit the kind of focalization chosen (e.g. ‘The car was green’ may mean either ‘As a narrator I assert that the car was green’ or ‘As a narrator I report that the character-focalizer saw that the car was green’). Indeed, the narrational instance is always in command and selects the information; hence, it may always decide to restrict the information to what a character perceives/thinks or to what it wants to communicate.
Narration may choose a certain focalization so as to produce narrative perspective and hence narrative effects. These include curiosity about characters, because it tells little about their antecedents; suspense when we see characters together, because it has given insight in their conflicting agendas; or surprise, as it reveals that they are together in the same room. Focalization exists in film too, though with some modifications.

Narratology across media

Narratology has been ‘conceived from its earliest days as a project that transcends disciplines and media’, Ryan explains (2004: 1) with reference to Bremond’s famous statement that story ‘is independent of the techniques that bear it along. It may be transposed from one to another medium without losing its essential properties’ (Bremond 1964: 4, translated by Chatman 1978: 20). The crucial thing to bear in mind—the one on which the possibility of narrativity hinges—is the capacity for a medium to sequentially provide cues of information about an action world and its characters. Since narrativity depends on narrative perspective, since narrative perspective depends on gradual narration, and since gradual narration exists both in words and moving images, both words and images are able to produce narrative perspective and hence narrativity (Chatman 1999: 436).

Indeed, any sequentially organized semiotic channel of communication can withhold and gradually disclose information for narrative effect. As it restricts information, it does something to our minds: either we want answers, because we are curious or in suspense, and the mind abhors a vacuum; or we are surprised by secretly delayed information. As we confront this flow of gaps and partial and full disclosures, we may want to ‘motivate’—conjure up a reason for—its restrictive communication. We may, for example, infer that the narration mimics the mind of a character and therefore restricts its communication to what a character’s minds perceives, feels and thinks. (Technically, the narration is then ‘figural’ or ‘internally focalized’, through a focalizing character that filters the information, and the narration or motivation is ‘mimetic’.) Or we may for example feel that the narration takes responsibility for playing with our minds. (Technically, the narration may remain ‘author-like’ or ‘externally focalized’, not filtered by a character’s mind, and the motivation is ‘aesthetic’.)

In terms of narrative effect, the grand narratological theme of focalization thus boils down to the mechanisms of gapping and disclosure in discourse time (Do we know more, as much, as little, or less than a character at time $t$ in the discourse?) and to the motivation we ascribe to these epistemic discourse moves. Regarding figural narration, Wilson points out that there are very few good movies ‘in which every shot of the film (or of a lengthy segment of the film) represents the field of vision of the central character’ (1986: 86, 128; emphasis in original). As we will now see, however, narration can still remain functionally figural—that is figural for the purposes of narrativity—in a broader sense.

A first mainstream cinematic way of employing constrained narration is to ‘let properties of the way in which the fictional world looks to us on the screen stand in for properties of the way in which that world is experienced by the character’, even though ‘the action is only partially, if at all, seen from his or her physical point of view’ (Wilson 1986: 87, emphasis in original). For instance, as Jules and Vincent are about to enter the apartment of the soon-to-be-bumped-off ‘business partners’ of Marsellus Wallace, there is a difference between the visual perspective of the two hitmen and that of the audience: the former stand facing a closed door, while the latter only see the back of the hitmen’s upper bodies as they face this door. But what is most important for narrativity is that we know as little as they do about what exactly to expect behind that door—and this creates feelings of curiosity and suspense,
mixed with the incongruous hilarity of their dialogue (about risky foot massages). Notice, actually, that this ‘behaviouristic’ restricted narration of cinema constrains our knowledge even more than typical figural prose narration, which as a mindreading activity not only selects what characters perceive but also verbalizes how they perceive it as well as other non-perceptual activity that is going on in their minds. In the film, as in real life, our only window into the minds of others is their behaviour and words. Yet we manage to handle this situation in real life (Goffman 1969), so we can handle this in film too (Wilson 1986: 90). This is particularly the case in mainstream film, a form of communication that automatically draws attention to the relevance of its cues (Sperber and Wilson 1986), and even tends to simplify those cues (Bordwell 1985).

A second less mainstream cinematic way of employing constrained narration is precisely to imitate the gapped, i.e. incomplete and interrupted, nature of real-life perception more fully, also with narrative effects (Wilson 1986: 89–95). In the mockumentary TV series *The Office* (2001–2003), for instance, the camera of the fictional ‘documentary makers’ sometimes manages to capture images of characters seemingly colluding, while the team’s microphone is unable to register what the characters are up to (suspense) or what they have possibly done (curiosity).

Cinematic or audiovisual narration does not have to constrain its information flow with reference to characters, however. Like novels, filmic narration can also decide to produce narrative perspective by restricting and distributing information without motivating it as internal focalization (hence ‘mimetic’ narration). In that vein, Tarantino contrasts the traditional use of flashbacks as a narrative strategy articulating a ‘personal perspective’ in film, with the ‘narrative perspective’ that flashbacks set out to deliver in *Reservoir Dogs* (1992):

> Novels go back and forth all the time. You read a story about a guy who’s doing something or in some situation and, all of a sudden, chapter five comes and it takes Henry, one of the guys, and it shows you seven years ago, where he was seven years ago and how he came to be and then like, *boom*, the next chapter, *boom*, you’re back in the flow of the action. Flashbacks, as far as I’m concerned, come from a personal perspective. These [in *Reservoir Dogs*] aren’t, they’re coming from a narrative perspective. They’re going back and forth like chapters.

*(Tarantino, quoted in Bordwell 2006: 91)*

The parallelisms between prose narration and audiovisual narration thus suggest that translation, even of the intersemiotic kind, should be able to preserve narrativity and its basic mechanisms. Ryan (2004: 1–2), however, brings into sharp relief the role that medium-specific considerations play in the narration process:

> the question of how the intrinsic properties of the medium shape the form of narrative and affect the narrative experience can no longer be ignored . . . Even when they seek to make themselves invisible, media are not hollow conduits for the transmission of messages but material supports of information whose materiality, precisely, ‘matters’ for the type of meanings that can be encoded.

Bearing in mind that *medium* is a tricky concept (Ryan 2004: 16ff.), our question here can be formulated as follows: Does the medium of communication—that is the chosen technology of narration, the sensory tracks it addresses (vision, hearing), and the sign systems it exploits (verbal, non-verbal)—after all modulate the possibility to produce narrative effects?
Surprisingly perhaps, given his insights into the possibilities of cinematic restricted narration, Wilson’s reply is plainly affirmative: ‘since verbal telling and cinematic showing are such very different narrational procedures, the issues that get raised in each case are not at all identical’ (1986: 100). Though a medium’s ability to show and restrict information is what makes narrativity possible, verbal telling and audiovisual narration differ to some extent in ways that pertain to narration and audiovisual translation. Two important issues are (1) simultaneity in narration and (2) the illusion of non-narration (Vercauteren 2012: 210).

As for the first problem, Neira Piñeiro (2003: 177–8) argues, audiovisual narrative discourse can communicate more information simultaneously than purely verbal narrative. Indeed, the description of an image is never saturated by one or even a few sentences (Chatman 1999: 438); the look of a character is more quickly visualized as a whole and scanned than told and read; images can at once show a character simultaneously engaged in multiple action and intentionality—as will be elaborated on in the audio description section below; images can at once show several characters engaged in action and intentionality (ibid); split-screen narration can multiply these problems; audiovisual narration simultaneously works with several channels that may interact, namely moving images, dialogue and the rest of the soundtrack. Sometimes the interaction will produce ‘redundancy’, but other times there will be mutual dependence between channels (‘anchoring’) (Marleau 1982: 274, Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007: 50).

As far as the second problem is concerned, it is worth noting that, while the narration of verbal narrative is always uttered (‘enunciated’) and therefore tends to suggest the presence of a narrator, film narration has a predominantly ‘mimetic’ effect, effacing the figure of the narrator (Gaudreault and Jost 1990: 40). Some important scholars have therefore gone so far as to reject the existence of filmic narrators (e.g. Bordwell 1985, Wilson 1986: 136). In terms of impression, an illusion of story-world autonomy—the fourth-wall effect—is indeed often created in mimetic narrative (Gaudreault and Jost 1990: 39–40, Vandaele 2010: 765–73). Thus, Bordwell (1985), invoking Occam’s razor, speaks of filmic narration and does away with the filmic narrator unless there happens to be a person who verbally narrates and whom the viewer either hears (e.g. a voice-over narrator outside the narrative world) or both sees and hears (e.g. the character-narrator Walter Neff in Billy Wilder’s Double Indemnity [1944]). In terms of analysis, however, narration without a narrator seems quite impossible, about as spooky as any other action posited to exist without any executing agent (Gaudreault and Jost 1990: 61). When Bordwell defines narration as ‘the organization of a set of cues for the construction of a story’ (1985: 62), one may wonder if this ‘organization’ is not organized by anybody, not even a group of agents (screenwriter, shooter, editor) (see also Currie 1995: 248). For Chatman (1984: 5), it does not matter if we call this agency the film’s ‘silent narrator’, or ‘principle of construction’, or ‘implied director’, or ‘whatever you may want to name the narrating instance’. Chatman (1999: 439–40), however, also admits that film narration differs from verbal narration in important ways, as will be elaborated below.

**Translating narrativity: action doubles as narration**

Though Bordwell and Wilson oppose the idea of a filmic narrator or communicator, there is an enormous difference between the immediate perception of the real world and the mediated perception of communicative film. Fiction films that are ostensibly written, shot and edited for communication with audiences indeed carry the constant presumption, like all human communication, that the viewers should be looking for relevant audiovisual information all the time (Sperber and Wilson 1986). Narrative film does not usually allow us to
dwell’ much on its ‘plenitude of visual details’ (Chatman 1999: 438–9), so it invites us to look for the narratively relevant.

This means, first, that all the ‘action’—verbal, para-verbal and non-verbal—always doubles as narration. The action we seem to ‘witness’ is in fact action we are told about. As Remael (2003: 233) writes, ‘film dialogue is not just “dialogue”, it is also narrative’, and this is so all the time, even though ‘mimetic’ audiovisual narration does not usually present a visible speaker, that is a verbalizing (‘diegetic’) narrator. Action, dialogue included, is the orientation of the characters within and towards their own world, the so-called ‘intra-diegetic’ story world, and at the same time the action is the signified that the narration directs towards the spectators, who seek to understand its relevance (informativeness) for their understanding of the action world.

Second, this also seems to mean that in narrative texts the ‘situation’—of characters—doubles as a description for audiences. This is a complicated matter, however. For starters, many narratologists (e.g. Bremond, Chatman, Sternberg, or Herman) have pointed out that descriptive parts tend to become servants of narrative texts (see also Orero and Vilaró 2012: 313). Descriptions are narrativized, as when we are gradually told in Pulp Fiction who should count as clients in the diner scenes; this signals the narrative relevance of descriptions and hence reduces the importance of the narration-description distinction as a means to discriminate between the narratively relevant and the less relevant. In film, moreover, the distinction is anyway much harder to make than in verbal narrative (Chatman 1984: 441).

In light of this theoretical discussion, how do audiences, translators and translation analysts go about finding narrative relevance in the source film? In narrative discourse, we constantly look for cues that allow us to produce degrees of narrative ‘clarity’ (Pérez-González 2014: 51) yet also narrativity-inducing degrees of temporary ‘opacity’ (Sternberg 2009: 460, 500). As for narrative clarity, or ‘cohesion’ (Chaume 2004), we are on the lookout for cues to construct and interpret chronology, causality and coincidence related to characters and their world. As for temporary opacity, we want to look for cues that produce interpretive gaps, possibly suggest hypothetical answers, overtly delay answers, and disclose covertly delayed information that throws new light on the situation. Audio describers should thus find, select and verbalize the visuals that are narratively relevant in this sense. Subtitlers for hearing audiences should find, select and render such narratively relevant cues in dialogue, with a focus on their verbal aspects rather than the para-verbal ones (such as intonation), while subtitlers for hearing-impaired people should also include narratively relevant cues in the rest of the soundtrack (e.g. Dick Dale’s guitar riff ‘Misirlou’ that kicks in just when Pulp Fiction’s opening scene freezes in mid-action).

Subtitling: dialogue doubles as narration

To begin this section on interlingual subtitling for hearing audiences, consider the ‘Garçon! Coffee!’ exclamation uttered in the opening and closing diner scenes of Pulp Fiction. As a speech act and action, this is a one-time event, as part of a dialogue between two characters in the story world (Pumpkin and the waitress); yet the narration registers the act and communicates this registration (a multimodal quote) to the audience on two different discourse moments (first in the opening diner scene and then in the concluding diner scene). The one-time speech act thus becomes part of two radically different narrative acts carried out by the narration. What changes between the first and the second mention, is the narrative meaning of ‘Garçon! Coffee!’ as produced by the narration and its sequencing: the first time it characterizes and also keeps us in mid-action; the second time it surprises. When it is first uttered,
and on a microlevel, an ‘anchoring’ between image and speech may be going on: ‘Garçon!’ further determines the gesturing of Pumpkin and, to the extent that ‘Garçon!’ is odd for Americans, they may have to interpret the images (and ‘Coffee!’) to understand ‘Garçon!’ as an appellative. Yet here already the narration makes sure that it shows the waitress, who critically picks up the word and tartly comments that ‘Garçon means “boy” in French’, so that any possible opacity and anchoring suddenly shift to action-logical redundancy, salience and memorability. The narrative relevance of this redundancy and salience becomes apparent in the second mention, at the end of the film discourse. The upshot for subtitling is that it here is narratively relevant to also draw attention to the appellative and its specific wording—against the tendency of subtitles to consider appellatives and other ‘procedural’ or ‘interactional’ communication not action-relevant and hence to be sacrificed, given the subtitle’s limited space and time. The question for subtitling is always whether the action—any action, appellation included—is relevant for the narration (e.g. surprise-preparing).

Relevant dialogue beyond the plot: narration

One way of answering the question of relevance is by saying that speech acts by characters may be either plot-relevant ‘dialogue’ or plot-irrelevant ‘conversation’, as Cattrysse and Gambier suggest with reference to screenwriting theory (2008: 52). Following this reasoning, subtitles will have to translate plot-relevant ‘dialogue’ lines for the sake of narrative clarity, as when Vincent indicates just before the start of the robbery that he needs to go to the toilet; the preceding pigs-and-dogs discussion, by contrast, is ‘conversation’, irrelevant for narrative clarity. However, as said, narrative relevance (narrativity) stems not only from plot (fabula) but also from opaque and retardatory narration (the garçon scene) and characterization. Regarding narration, the supposedly plot-irrelevant pigs-and-dogs conversation does have narrative relevance since it relaxes and distracts the audience before disclosing where they are conversing—a narrative surprise that produces further suspense. ‘Conversation’ may thus be narratively relevant while—or even by—suggesting plot-irrelevant comic relief.

Relevant dialogue beyond the plot: characterization

Regarding characterization, Díaz Cintas and Remael (2007: 172, 174) and Remael (2003) show that dialogue has an impact on characterization, which in turn has an impact on narrative relevance—not just when a narrative is character-oriented (pace Aristotle) but also because characterization guides our narrative response. The so-called ‘primacy effect’, or cognitive salience of first impressions, allows the narration to later stage the surprising ‘fall of early impressions’ (Sternberg 1978). For instance, it takes little time for the discourse in Pulp Fiction to show Jules as a ruthless killer, yet in the end Jules refrains from killing Pumpkin and Honey Bunny (Filmography: ‘BMF Wallet’ clip). The so-called ‘recency effect’, or cognitive salience of the latest impressions we received, somewhat counteracts the primacy effect in this example: Jules had just told Vincent that he wanted to quit gangster life, which lends some credibility to Jules’ nevertheless surprisingly merciful stance (surprising since Pumpkin has just pointed a gun squarely at his face).

Furthermore, as Remael shows, mainstream film subtitles have a tendency to make characters come across as more abrupt, less idiosyncratic and more standardized, and to reduce the speech of already quite silent and possibly dissenting characters (2003: 236–240; also Kruger 2008: 81). Again, this is not only important for character-oriented narrative, it may
also change the audience’s perception of characters, their traits and motivation, the causalities that we hypothesize, and our time- and information-governed answers to curiosity and suspense gaps. When Jules and Vincent are let into the apartment, for instance, Jules’ first words (‘Hey kids. How you boys doin?’ Hey, keep chillin’!’) seem to imply an exaggerated sense of closeness as well as Jules’ self-confident identity and condescension, especially given the suspenseful situation (Filmography: ‘Big Kahuna Burger’ clip). It is possible that the stiffer, more standardized language of for example the Norwegian Netflix subtitles produces a partly different characterization and hence narrative situation: Hei unger. Hvordan har dere det? / Ta det med ro. (‘Hello, kids. How are you doing? / Take it easy.’). Less standardized and more slangy, the Dutch Netflix subtitles do capture more meanings that are also narratively relevant: Hallo jongens, hoe gaat het met jullie? / Chill . . . (‘Hello boys, how’s it going with you? / Chill . . .’). The use here of the one-word ‘chill’ also shows how timing in subtitling (synchrony with speech onset and duration of appearance) may have effects on narrativity beyond its function to establish which character is being heard and translated. Thanks to its concision, ‘Chill . . .’ can stay on the screen somewhat longer than needed for comprehension and thus draw attention to Jules’ way of speaking and behaving, with effects on characterization (‘Who is he?’) and suspense (‘What will he do?’).

Audio description: verbalizing images that double as narration

Audio description (AD) is meant to help visually impaired audiences find narrative relevance in films and TV programmes, despite partial or total lack of access to the images (Vercauteren 2012: 209). It is a ‘spoken commentary added to film soundtracks’ ideally ‘supplementing the information that is already available from character dialogue and other parts of the soundtrack’ (Palmer and Salway 2015: 126). On the one hand, all images are potentially relevant in the sense that they may provide clarity and relevance for fabula construction, or at least communicate the presumption of relevance for fabula construction, or perceptibly or imperceptibly sidestep a coherent fabula construction at time \( t \) in the sjuzhet. On the other hand, as with subtitles, the time available for inserting verbalizations between dialogues is limited, so the first question will be ‘What do we select?’ (Marzà Ibáñez 2010, Vercauteren 2012).

Narratively relevant images: detection and selection

First, as for cues that produce clarity (coherence or relevance for fabula construction), AD has to select those images that necessarily contextualize fabula-relevant aspects of the dialogue. For example, as the hitmen find themselves outside the building where the apartment hit is about to take place, Vincent’s highly deictic ‘How many up there?’ is soon specified by the image of the building in question. Significantly, AD also has to select those images that speak for themselves—as happens in this scene, when Jules and Vincent enter that building (see Vercauteren 2012: 225–227 on what to include for coherence).

Second, in terms of cues that produce narrativity through opacity (presumed or covert relevance for fabula construction), AD ideally selects as many images as possible that suggest what the dialogue does not suggest. To that effect, audio describers can learn to recognize their narrative states of mind—suspense, curiosity and surprise—and become aware of the discursive cues that trigger those mental states. In that respect, ‘eye behavior is central to understanding human action, both onscreen and offscreen’ (Bordwell 2008: 327). The gaze of characters may indicate what one or several characters have in mind—quite literally
taken—when saying something: any visually present referent of a verbal item, any other character, any element that constitutes an ‘affordance’ for some character (Gibson 1979), i.e. an opportunity for an action at some point.

Of note is the fact that the narratively relevant visual cues may be small, i.e. not quite screen-filling and easily overlooked (Vandaele 2012). As they approach the apartment, for instance, the gaze of characters Jules and Vincent suggests that they are repeatedly performing one type of mute action—checking out the safety of an apartment block before their encounter with potentially armed targets—even though their dialogue is about their boss, his wife Mia, how the boss severely maimed a guy who gave her a foot massage, or whether foot massages are really such a big deal.

The scene prior to the gangsters’ arrival outside the flat introduces us to Jules and Vincent, who are featured in a car talking about differences between the US and Europe, mainly Amsterdam and Paris (Filmography: ‘Royale with Cheese’ clip). When they arrive at the apartment building, they start discussing the business at hand:

Jules: We should have shotguns for this kind of a deal. [Gun loading sound.]
Vincent: How many up there?
Jules: Three or four.
Vincent: That’s counting our guy?
Jules: Not sure.
Vincent: So that means it could be up to five guys up there?
Jules: It’s possible.
Vincent: We should have fuckin’ shotguns. [Part of car is slammed shut.]
Vincent: What’s her name?
Jules: Mia.

The British audio description below reduces narrativity—suspense—by not selecting the two hitmen’s ongoing visual checks (at least ten) before they knock on the apartment door. The following paragraph features the description that has been inserted in the audio described dialogue:

They enter an apartment block . . . Jules and Vincent get into the old-style elevator. They stare unemotionally ahead. Vincent looks puzzled [in reaction to what Jules says] . . . The men in matching black suits, white shirts and thin black ties step from the lift into the hallway. Jules leads Vincent further down the corridor. They pause by a window . . . They return to pause by the door where they’d paused a moment ago . . . Jules mimics a gun [in reaction to what Vincent says]. Jules shakes his head. . . . He has a jheri curl hairdo and sideburns. Vincent has shoulder-length hair and twinkling blue eyes. 

(AD file available on http://progressive.ifdnrg.com/streams/yourlocalcinema/PulpFictionCLIP.mp3)

Despite including the initial dialogue about what awaits them in the apartment, the AD thus shifts the original’s suspense-laden comedy or comic suspense (Vandaele 2010) towards pure comedy about the dangers of foot massage. This is because the narrativity (in this case, the narrative suspense) here hinges on those visual cues that continuously remind us, during the incongruous dialogue or in minute alternation, that there is also imminent danger. Also lost, for the same reason, is the characterization of both men as witty and relaxed even under pressure, with a possible gun fight ahead.
Given such problems of detection or selection, Orero and Vilaró (2012) suggest using eye-tracking methodology for investigating the visual attention that audiences pay to characters; and eye-tracking research by Kruger (2012: 67) seems to confirm that ‘visually peripheral elements’ which play a ‘covert’ role in narrative are important and compete for attention with more ‘overt’ visual elements. Vandaele (2012) draws attention to the following visual cues besides gaze: available objects of perception, apparent non-perception, sharedness of (non-)perception, and passive reactions of characters (non-reaction as action).

**Narratively relevant images: aspects of verbalization**

In the previous scene there was narratively relevant simultaneity in communication—dialogue and safety checks—but there were in principle sufficient opportunities for verbal compensation. The problem was one of detection and/or selection. Beyond this problem, however, the opportunity for speech may sometimes be too limited to compensate for the audiovisual narration’s simultaneity (Vercauteren 2012: 220–221). Moreover, even when there is an opportunity for speech, the verbal narration of two actions will suggest the relevance of both asserted actions, while film narration can show two actions without actually communicating that both should count as relevant actions (Chatman 1999: 440, Vercauteren 2012: 210).

In the Coen brothers’ *No Country for Old Men* (2007) (Filmography: ‘The Deputy’ clip), simultaneous audiovisual narration thus suggests that the gaze of one character-in-action is not directed toward something that is important to him: a sheriff does not realize that the criminal Anton is approaching. To enter in a narrative state, audiences need information (or disinformation) about affordances. Any description that ‘the sheriff has his back turned to Anton’ and ‘remains calm’ will therefore be an important part of the verbal narration. However, audio narration cannot achieve simultaneity; so when it asserts, as it has to, that (a) the sheriff is on the phone (b) with his back to Anton (c) who is approaching, it communicates the presumption of relevance of all three asserted facts, whereas the filmic narration may suggest this overall relevance somewhat more gradually.

Taking their cue from Wittgenstein, Palmer and Salway (2015: 131) advise audio describers to assess where the verbal expressions available are situated on what they call the action-thought continuum: ‘They are standing behind the curtain’ is closer to the behavioural pole (action), while ‘They are hiding behind the curtain’ is closer to the mindreading pole (thought). To see that this choice may modulate though not make or break suspense, consider for the sheriff scene the choice between thought-reading narration (e.g. ‘The sheriff does not see that Anton is approaching’) and behaviourist narration (e.g. ‘The sheriff has his back turned to Anton, who is approaching’). Insofar as film narrative seldom engages in mindreading, and since the explicit verbal expression of causality (‘because’, ‘therefore’, ‘in order to’) has no counterpart in image sequences (Ryan 2004: 11), what Palmer and Salway (2015) call behaviourist narration is often preferred by audio description specialists. Palmer and Salway also point out that expressions are often located between the poles of the continuum. Indeed, to what extent are expressions like ‘She smiles’ or ‘She hesitates’ behaviourist descriptions or renderings of a character’s emotive-mental point of view (ibid.: 134)? Furthermore, given the links between narrative force and hypothesis formation, I suggest that modalizing expressions may sometimes be useful (‘He seems to’), though one should not cognitively ‘overburden’ the audience (Pérez-González 2014: 26).
Narratively relevant images: The timing of characterization

Visual communication is able to present information simultaneously (Remael and Vercauteren 2007: 75), while purely verbal narrative communication is radically sequential—word after word, proposition after proposition. We have just seen how this difference may affect the micro-dynamics of narrativity; yet it may also affect the dynamics of characterization. The audio description for *Pulp Fiction* quoted above, for instance, waits to give certain details about the physical appearance of Jules, such as his *jheri* curl hairdo and sideburns, until they have left the car and entered the building—instead of delivering that information when Jules first makes his appearance in the film. Some insights by Chatman (1999: 450) are almost of *verbatim* relevance here: no member of the audience will actually formulate in so many words that Jules was black, had a *jheri* curl hairdo and sideburns, and so on; we may have a profound sense of Jules’ presence as incarnated by Samuel Jackson but not of the assertion of those details as such, nor in the order given by the verbal narration. Yet the AD, when it has the chance, may need to single out and assert some aspects for character construction. Regarding Jules, the audio describer should ask which aspects impinge on later hypothesis formulation by non-impaired audiences: does this image communicate something *relevant soon* for hypothesis formation about this character’s behaviour in future situations—e.g. the hallway scene, the apartment scene and the diner scene?

Dubbing

Narrative and synchrony

The best-known constraint of translation for dubbing, i.e. lip synchrony, should not be problematic for the development of narrative. Experts in semiotic coherence (e.g. Chaume 2008; cf. also Schwarz 2011: 400) indicate one caveat regarding narrative clarity: lip synchrony should not come at the cost of ‘kinesic’ asynchrony, where facial expressions and body movements would not cohere with the dubbed dialogue, as when a character shakes her head but says *sí* (‘yes’) in Catalan (Chaume 2008: 133). In order to test if lip synchrony can be married with overall semiotic coherence, including narrative clarity, Chaume presents his readers with a case from *Pulp Fiction* that is interesting for its narrative meanings. Vincent has just arrived at his boss’ home to pick up Mia (Uma Thurman), who, unseen by Vincent, talks to him over an intercom microphone ‘with a striking close-up of her lips’ (2008: 138). She says, ‘Go make yourself a drink, and I’ll be down in two shakes of a lamb’s tail.’ As a speech action, it is an instruction as well as a promise. As a part of narration, it characterizes Mia as a mysterious and elusive person—open to mind games, verbally creative, and perhaps somewhat dominant. As such, the scene harks back to the earlier conversation Vincent and Jules had about her, and builds curiosity as well as suspense. What is she like? Will Vincent be able to resist her? Is he in danger of going too far, like the unfortunate foot massager?

Existing translations show that aspects of synchrony need not hinder narrative clarity or emotions. A Spanish dubbing from Netflix Mexico—*Prepárate una copa y bajaré en menos de lo que te imaginas* (‘Prepare a drink and I will come down in less than you imagine’)—complies with three noticeable lip closings and most narrative functions, though not the verbal creativity of *two shakes of a lamb’s tail*. The corresponding French dubbing from Netflix France—*Faites comme chez vous. J’en ai pour deux secondes. Le temps d’un battement de cil.* (‘Act as if you’re at home. I need two seconds. The time it
takes to bat an eyelash.’)—also retains three noticeable lip closings and most narrative functions, though not the explicit drinking instruction, which is relegated to the next scene where Mia speaks off-screen, which in French includes the instruction Servez-vous à boire (‘Serve yourself a drink’).

**Narrative and synchrony**

Besides lip and kinesic synchrony, there is one more aspect of dubbing to be mentioned in the context of narrative fiction. As often happens in translation, there is a standardization tendency in the dubbing of dialogue—sometimes a consequence or legacy of explicit ideology (Vandaele 2015: 173). Quite parallel to what Remael (2003) says about mainstream subtitling, Pérez-González (2014: 128) notes that dubbing translates less the characterization-enhancing aspects of the original film dialogue (its ‘appraisal telos’) than aspects that propel the narrative (its ‘mood telos’); and Bosseaux (2015) relates neutralizing characterization to aspects of performance in dubbing (e.g. range of vocabulary, voice characteristics, and so on).

**Summary**

This chapter has focused on the production and translation of narrativity in audiovisual texts. Action (in the story) should always be analyzed as the narration of action; and the narration of action (and action situations) produce narrative clarity (coherence) as well as degrees of opacity (conspicuous and hidden information gaps). As for clarity, narrativity of course depends on comprehensible scene construction, so the identification of setting, participants, action and interaction is basic. As for opacity, the chapter has focused on ‘the big three’ narrative effects—suspense, curiosity and surprise (Bordwell 2008: 101). These narrative effects are produced through character-oriented focalization as well as the narrating instance’s decision to tell things selectively and in a certain order. This is possible across media but each medium of narration does have special possibilities and constraints. Audiovisual translators, moreover, often have to cope with additional constraints of space and time. Their translation solutions, however, can at the very least be grounded in a profound understanding of narrativity, its mechanisms and devices, and the extent to which it depends on medium-specific narration.

**Further reading**


**Related topics**

3 Subtitling on the cusp of its futures
4 Investigating dubbing: learning from the past, looking to the future
6 Subtitling for deaf and hard of hearing audiences: moving forward
8 Audio description: evolving recommendations for usable, effective and enjoyable practices
Narratology and audiovisual translation

References


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Narratology and audiovisual translation

Filmography

*Double Indemnity* (1944) Billy Wilder. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0036775/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1


*No Country for Old Men* (clip) ‘The Deputy’: https://www.miramax.com/watch?v=Y0aTVuYTqUmU_BDKlAXt9niW_A4NjGF

*Pulp Fiction* (1994) Quentin Tarantino. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0110912/?ref_=nv_sr_1

*Pulp Fiction* (clip) ‘Big Kahuna Burger’: https://www.miramax.com/watch?v=ExMjlvYT0YOStXO4a_C_Vx0D2ZzNZGG1Q1

*Pulp Fiction* (clip) ‘BMF Wallet’: https://www.miramax.com/watch?v=IpNHRuYzr1Vc3apQBydQ9cJMXgUjZjCj


*Pulp Fiction* (clip) ‘Royale with Cheese’: https://www.miramax.com/watch?v=FmM3NvZTor5ZSe5SOQC5N3udTwFBJYQn
