2

History of audiovisual translation

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Introduction

Audiovisual translation studies has been experiencing a resurgence in interest in historical approaches since the early 2010s. This has followed a more general growing interest in translation history since the late 1990s. These developments require the researcher to look simultaneously at translation practices, technical processes and marketing strategies that are all intertwined, especially in the early years of film translation. We say ‘film translation’ here since this phrase is widely used in the pre-TV era, though as is explained elsewhere in this volume, a number of different terms have been used over the years. This chapter takes, broadly speaking, a chronological approach. It begins by looking at the translated intertitles and film explainers of the silent era. It goes on to look at the transition to sound, at the short-lived multilingual versions and then at the development of subtitling and dubbing. The question of translation into English and the cultural position of the ‘foreign film’ is briefly dealt with. The chapter ends by outlining current issues and new debates in film translation history, touching on a couple of significant methodological contributions in this area.

Audiovisual translation in the silent period

In the pre-sound era, films were silent, but not speechless: mouths could be seen speaking on the screen and title cards conveyed narration and the gist of dialogues actually or seemingly spoken by the actors. The translation of silent film is one of the biggest gaps in audiovisual translation (AVT) research. AVT researchers have tended to write off this field on the grounds that the translation of silent film is unproblematic, at least by comparison with the problems which accompanied the coming of sound. For instance, Jan Ivarsson and Mary Carroll observe that intertitles were simply ‘removed, translated . . . filmed, and re-inserted’ (1998: 9). Tessa Dwyer has insightfully noted, however, that ‘the internationalism and supposed universalism of the silent era was in fact underwritten by a vast array of translation practices’ (2005: 301). These could include the presence of live narrators (see below), the reorganization of intertitles, and the modification of storylines, including the provision of alternate endings (the so-called ‘Russian endings’; see Cherchi Usai 2000: 12). Markus Nornes, one of the few scholars to
have looked in any detail at the translation of silent film, has identified one typical workflow as involving the shipping of a list of titles from Hollywood to the various distributors, who would translate the titles and send these ‘flash titles’ back to the studio (Nornes 2007: 97–98). This negatively affected the quality of the titling, e.g. when technicians without language expertise were reshooting the titles. Thereafter, these titles were dispatched along with the print so that the distributor could have more control over the translation and reinsertion of the titles (ibid.: 98).

Paratranslation was also important; for example ‘each Famous Players-Lasky film was also accompanied by fifty or so other items that required translation and printing in the target languages’ (ibid.). Error-ridden English titles written by non-native speakers in the film’s country of origin were also a source of complaints. Title cards could be quite elaborately ornamented (‘art titles’) and this ornamentation was often lost from recreated titles. Barry Salt (1992: 109) sees a link between a reduction in film export (e.g. during the First World War) and an increased use of illustrated title cards; in periods where overseas markets accounted for a lot of trade, illustrated title cards were less favoured because they were more challenging to translate. Such links between film style and translation are key to audiovisual translation history.

Dwyer concludes that ‘the degree of translation required to preserve the myth of universalism [of silent film] was phenomenal’ (2005: 301). She draws on Ruth Vasey’s film-historical study The World According to Hollywood 1918–1939, which pays considerable attention to the textual instability of film, and the ways in which this facilitated the sale of films across national borders. As Vasey (1997: 64) notes, ‘[s]ilent movies were themselves never so precisely fixed as their talkie descendants’. This is well illustrated by Joost Broeren’s study of the Dutch context and the Desmet collection of silent films, which includes useful details on their localization. Broeren argues that cinema of the 1910s ‘is fluid, changeable, malleable; there is no original because every print could be different, and thus every print was an original—or no print was’ (Broeren 2008: 65). An example of a heavily localized silent film can be found in Nornes (2007: 101): the Dutch version of Where are my Children (1916) was extensively recut and censored for exhibition in the Netherlands. Another manifestation of translation which shows the extent to which silent film was indebted to translation and translation-like processes was the ‘translating dissolve’ (see O’Sullivan 2011: 45–50) which developed as a way of negotiating differences between the language of the diegesis and the language of narration.

Although the area remains almost completely undiscussed by translation scholars (see Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007: 26), we must consider the translation of film in the silent period as a holistic process involving the translation of title cards, the omission or addition of title cards, film editing and paratranslation.

**Benshis, bonimenteurs and other film explainers**

From the very early years of cinema (late 1890s, early 1900s), there were people whose task was to explain and comment on what was happening on the screen. When title cards were introduced, they would read out or explain their content for the benefit of illiterate audience members. Such ‘film explainers’ were active in the United States and Europe until the mid- or late 1910s (Boillat 2007: 132, Barnier 2010: 264). In France and Quebec they were called bonimenteurs (‘yarn spinners’) and conférenciers (‘lecturers’) (Barnier 2010: 89–119, Lacasse 2000, Lacasse, Bouchard and Scheppeler 2009). They were also popular in Japan where benshis were sometimes stars in their own right and lasted into the early sound years. Of all the film explainers, the benshis have probably been the most studied, given their cultural profile in Japan and the Japanese historiographical tradition (Nornes 2007: 110–119).
Film explainers sometimes translated foreign films. In the early 1900s in the USA, ‘titles were read from the screen aloud and translated into a dozen languages’ (Brownlow 1973: 11). Very few researchers have commented upon the role of film explainers as translators. Boillat (2007: 124–129) develops this aspect of their activity in a sense that goes beyond the need to translate a foreign language, and has to do with wider processes of ‘image-reading’ and ‘cultural translation.’ In this broader sense, film explaining may thus be considered a form of intralingual, interlingual and intersemiotic film translation. The translation aspect of film explaining occasionally reappeared after the transition to sound, for example in René Clair’s Man About Town, the American version of his Le Silence est d’or (1947), in which actor and singer Maurice Chevalier summarizes the narration and dialogue in English at regular intervals, while the original French sound-track remains unchanged (Cornu 2014: 26–27). Film explaining itself does continue, in a way, via interpreting at film festivals (see Razlogova 2015 for a historical approach).

Audiovisual translation and the transition to sound

Although, as previously mentioned, languages were not totally absent from silent films, the talkies ushered multilingualism into cinema on a worldwide scale. Synchronized speech was first introduced in American films, and solutions quickly needed to be devised to successfully maintain the worldwide distribution of Hollywood product. Because of the prevalence of the English language in the early talking period, the situation was quite different in English-speaking and non-English-speaking countries.

The first talking film to be released internationally was Warner Brothers’ The Jazz Singer (Crosland 1927). Although mainly a silent film with a musical sound-track and only a few ‘live’ talking scenes, it heralded the talking era and continues to be perceived as its starting point to this day. Information is oddly scarce as to how this film was shown to non-English-speaking audiences around the world. It remains unclear how or whether it was translated at all when it reached continental Europe in 1929. It seems that in France the film was shown with intertitles in French, with written translations of the spoken scenes, projected onto an adjacent screen like slides (Anon. 1929: 24, Thompson 1985: 158–159).

With the increasing number of talking films released outside their original linguistic region, one of the early translation strategies consisted in not translating them (see e.g. Low 1985: 91). In 1929–1930, dubbing processes had not yet begun to be devised, and subtitling as we know it today was rare. Because audiences outside America quickly resented having to sit through English-speaking films, Hollywood producers and foreign distributors resorted to ‘synchronized’ films, i.e. silent versions of talkies with music as their only sound, and inserted intertitles similar to silent title cards (Cornu 2014: 27–28, Freire 2015: 194–203). This practice was used in Italy, for example, where an ordinance of 22 October 1930 forbade speech on film in languages other than Italian (Quargnolo 2000: 19). Only songs were permitted in the foreign language. Quargnolo observes that more than 300 films were exhibited with title cards in the place of dialogue, ‘which more or less explained the dialogue spoken by the actors in the original film, but which weighed down its rhythm and limited and fragmented the flow of images’ (our translation). Some films ended up with huge quantities of title cards: up to 200 or even 250 title cards per film (ibid.: 20).

Another strategy eschewing translation as such consisted in reshooting close-ups containing spoken dialogue with a local cast, and keeping the speechless long shots of the original films to avoid having to shoot the whole film again (Cornu 2014: 28–29). These practices were short-lived, as was the strategy of making bilingual or multilingual films in order to

Simultaneously and in different parts of the world, processes and methods were developed which broadly fall into two categories: adding written texts in the form of titles superimposed onto the film or projected on an adjacent screen; or replacing the original dialogues with lines spoken in languages that could be understood by local audiences. Adding titles that could be read simultaneously with hearing the characters speak became known as subtitling. Changing the spoken language of the film was achieved through two main strategies: the ill-fated multilinguals and the much more enduring dubbing process.

With multilinguals, the same story and dialogue would be shot in a number of languages, using the same technical crew, but changing the cast for each different language. Dubbing consisted of replacing the original dialogue and actors’ voices with new lines in the languages of the countries where the film was to be released. Both methods are further developed in specific sections below.

In the early 1930s, a small number of major Hollywood studios bet on the dubbing method to reconquer the territories they had temporarily lost with the introduction of speech in films. Audiences throughout Latin America and Europe enjoyed the novelty but soon resented the fact that the films spoke English. Making their films heard in Spanish, French and other major European languages seemed to be the solution for Hollywood to keep film markets that were essential to recoup production costs and increase profits. In Asia, Hollywood companies preferred to use subtitling, which took the form of projecting titles on a secondary screen located beside the main image screen, particularly in Japan and China. A similar practice obtained in the Middle East (Cornu 2014: 230).

Outside America, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, Germany was the country that produced the highest number of films, both for local consumption and export. To maintain distribution beyond its borders as well as feeding its theatres with foreign talking films, Germany also turned to dubbing. However, the overall control of the German film industry by the Nazis from 1933 brought about a decline in the export of films to the rest of the world.

The Hollywood domination of worldwide film distribution made English the main language used in the new talking films. However, during the early transition years, talkies from non-English-speaking countries also started to circulate in Anglophone countries. These mainly came from France and Germany. Intertitles were briefly used to translate foreign-language dialogue, e.g. in *Westfront 1918* (Pabst 1930) as they had been used to translate incidental foreign-language dialogue in Hollywood product as well, in films such as *Hell’s Angels* (Hughes 1930) and *Seas Beneath* (Ford 1931). The Film Society in Britain also used intertitles, having tried such techniques as ‘printing a synopsis of the story on translucent paper which the audience read by holding up their copies to the light from the screen’, as Thorold Dickinson recalls (quoted in Mazdon and Wheatley 2013: 27). In a few cases, films were provided with some English-speaking sequences for release in English-speaking territories, for instance, René Clair’s *Le Million* (1931). According to reviews at the time, the opening sequence of this film was apparently reshot with altered dialogue; instead of all characters speaking French, two observers in the opening scene are transformed into an Englishman and his friend who interprets the French dialogue of the other characters for him. Extra scenes featuring these two characters were also introduced at intervals, in order that the action of the film could be interpreted for an English-speaking audience. In some ways this could be considered a kind of ‘pre-recorded’ form of film explaining.
Multilingual versions

Much of the research on the transitional period between the late 1920s and early 1930s has focused on Hollywood’s multilingual versions (Vincendeau 1988, Šurovičová 1992). The first multilingual film may have been E.A. Dupont’s *Atlantic* (1929) for British International Pictures, which was shot in English in July 1929, in German and French later in 1930 (Low 1985: 92–93, Barnier 2002: 124, Wahl 2016: 56, 79–80). The film consisted of sequences that could be used in all versions, and dialogue sequences which needed to be reshot in each language. It was shot over a period of several months in 1929 and 1930, making it a cross between a multilingual version (which was, in its archetypal version, shot simultaneously on a single set in shifts) and a remake. The boundary between multilingual versions, remakes and screen translations is very fuzzy, as with Augusto Genina’s *Prix de beauté* (1930) and its mixture of a multilingual live sound recording with an early form of dubbing (Pozzi 2003), and the French version of Fritz Lang’s *M* (1931) (Albera et al. 2013).

The great ferment of multilingual versions in Hollywood took place from 1930 to 1931. As scholars such as Colin Gunckel (2008) have shown, one of the great stumbling blocks was the poor linguistic choices made by the production companies; Gunckel looks at Spanish-language films in Hollywood and shows how the primitiveness of the sound technologies was exacerbated by the non-native or regionally inappropriate accents of the characters. As Martin Barnier shows (2004: 201–202), French language filming in California and Europe lasted several years beyond the heyday of the multilingual versions; French musical comedies were shot as late as the mid-1930s by Paramount, Fox and MGM. The last British International Pictures multilingual version was shot in 1931 (Low 1985: 93).

Whereas the production of multilingual versions principally happened over just two years in Hollywood (Barnier 2002: 119–124; Cornu 2014: 29–30), in Europe, they were made over a longer period, with three main production centres, London, Paris and Berlin. The Tobis company, a Dutch-German-Swiss concern, epitomized the pan-European multilingual production of the early 1930s by making such films in all three cities (Barnier 2002: 124–125).

Determined to compete on European ground, Paramount created a state-of-the-art Hollywood-style production centre outside Paris. Opened in 1929, the Saint-Maurice-Joinville studios produced multilingual versions on a large scale in most European languages. Paramount employed the best screenplay and dialogue writers, theatre and film actors and directors who churned out polyglot versions day and night. According to Ginette Vincendeau, at Paramount films could be shot in up to 14 different language versions (1988: 26). Like the Hollywood-made multilinguals, these eventually failed to be commercial hits and Paramount stopped making them in mid-1932 (Barnier 2002: 121–122).

As the biggest European film-producing country equipped with the best sound stages (Wolfgang Jacobsen quoted in Kreimeier 1996: 181), Germany was to become the largest multilingual producer, through the Tobis company and its rival, the huge Ufa film conglomerate. Berlin was the main centre of this production, which consisted largely of light comedies and operettas. As in Hollywood and Joinville, entire casts were hired to work in shifts on the same set, playing the same scenes each in their own languages. Some polyglot actors could play in several versions of a film, like the Anglo-German actress Lilian Harvey who was fluent in three languages and starred in the famous *Der Kongress tanzt* (Charell, 1931) shot in German, French and English (Barnier 2002: 126–128). Ufa was the company which produced multilinguals for the longest time in the early sound period, from 1929 to 1939 (Wahl 2016). In Italy such versions continued to be made in Italian, Spanish and
German for another few years, from 1939 to 1943, uniting the three fascist powers on screen (Heinink 2013: 115).

Although generally short-lived, multilinguals have been well documented (Ďurovičová 2004; Bock and Venturini 2005; Pitassio and Quaresima 2005). Some of these films were specific experiments in early sound practices and are evidence of the quick and creative adaptation of directors and technicians to the new constraints of sound recording (Barnier 2002). Such interesting outcomes of the research on multilinguals for the history of early sound recording and reproduction practices have inspired a similar perspective on early sound practices in dubbing (Cornu 2014). Although they may not be considered ‘translated films’ in their own right, unlike dubbed and subtitled versions, multilinguals involve translation operations which have not been investigated: in particular, screenplays and dialogue had to be translated from the main language into a varying number of other languages. Yet very little evidence and few accounts, if any, survive about how such translation was done and by whom.

**History of subtitling in the sound period**

The subtitles of the early talking films are sometimes considered a direct legacy of silent intertitles. Yet their function is different (Cornu 2014: 223–229). The title cards in silent films were used to convey both narrative information and dialogue, and they were inserted between shots (except towards the end of the silent era when intertitles could be superimposed on the picture of films such as F. W. Murnau’s *Sunrise* and Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Ring*, both 1927). The subtitles of talking films only translate dialogue, and written information such as shop signs, newspaper headlines, etc. They appear as lines of text horizontally superimposed in the lowest part of the image in most languages, although they can be vertically positioned on either side of the image in Asian languages (see e.g. Nornes 2007: 150–151). However, there is a technical link between intertitles and early subtitles in the photographic process used to add text to image in the very early talking years (and see above for a few examples of films where intertitles were used with a translating function).

Because the first talking films distributed worldwide were overwhelmingly American productions, subtitling was initially mainly done out of English into other languages. As the main markets for Hollywood productions were European countries, various subtitling processes were developed mostly in Europe at first. In the early years, the photographic printing process was widely used both in America and Europe, but it was poorly legible when the white letters of subtitles ‘melted’ in the white areas of the image (see, for example, the French subtitling of G. W. Pabst’s *Kameradschaft* or Leontine Sagan’s *Mädchen in Uniform*, both 1931). Methods to improve readability were devised in Hungary, Sweden and France (Ivarsson and Carroll 1998: 9–11). The most enduring ones were chemical subtitling (from 1933 to the early 1990s) and laser subtitling (from 1988 to the late 2000s), whereby subtitles were ‘burnt’ into the film strip. A fine black line circling each letter made the subtitles easier to read, but they could still occasionally disappear in deep white backgrounds. This problem was solved with the advent and expansion of digital subtitling which guarantees perfect legibility in all areas of the image (Cornu 2014: 230–239, 266–272). All these processes have been used for the theatrical release of films. Electronic subtitles were introduced in the 1970s, first for television. Computer-generated texts were created and incorporated within the electronic TV image. This method was consequently applied to video releases of films on VHS tapes, and then to DVDs that now use digital systems. It is also used in film festivals, with subtitles being projected below or within the image.
AVT developed rather differently on different continents. European countries with major film industries, such as Germany, Italy and France, tended to favour dubbing, a costly method for countries which had smaller film infrastructures. This is the main reason why Scandinavian countries, as well as the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, Portugal and Greece opted for subtitling. In Latin America, dubbing became the preferred choice in Spanish-speaking countries after an initial period of acceptance of subtitles, while subtitling quickly imposed itself in Portuguese-speaking Brazil (Freire 2015). Levels of literacy and national bilingualism also played a part in the choice of dubbing. Although a major film-producing country favouring dubbing, France has contributed to the technical and commercial development of subtitling from the transition-to-sound period until today. This is partly due to an on-going cinephile tradition among viewers; subtitling never quite lost its foothold in the market.

Accounts of early translation practices applied to subtitling are scarce and it is often difficult to know how the pioneering subtitlers worked and who they were. Early talkies subtitled in and out of English seemed to have a very limited number of subtitles which were meant to convey the very gist of what was said on the screen. This is particularly true of films subtitled into English in the UK and the USA, and of Portuguese-subtitled films distributed in Brazil (Freire 2015: 191). Foreign films subtitled into French seem to have contained a larger number of subtitles sooner. According to Suzanne Chantal, a pioneer of French subtitling who worked throughout the 1930s, some translators were happy to keep to a limited number of concise subtitles, while others tried to translate all the dialogue and convey the subtleties it contained (1936: 42).

The first films to be subtitled in English in the UK were probably *Kameradschaft* (Pabst 1931) and *Mädchen in Uniform* (Sagan 1931) in the spring of 1932 (Low 1985: 100). However, Mazdon and Wheatley (2013: 28–19) report on a showing of the early French talkie *Le Collier de la reine* (1929) in June 1930 in Bristol with English subtitles, which may not have been on the film print itself, but separately projected on or near the screen. Early optical subtitling techniques in which ‘the titles were set up in the lab, photographed and combined with the negative’ (Low 1985: 100) gave poor results; later, more satisfactory mechanical and chemical methods were adopted (ibid.; Ivarsson and Carroll 1998: 13–15).

Subtitling may have begun in the United States with Herman Weinberg, who certainly claims credit for being the first working subtitler in New York; the first film he subtitled was *Zwei Herzen im 3/4 Takt* (Two Hearts in Waltz Time) by Géza von Bolváry in 1930, though subtitles took another year or two to catch on. Weinberg describes experimenting first with full screen titles ‘giving the audience a brief synopsis of what they were going to see in the next ten minutes’; the invention of the Moviola sound editing machine allowed the timing of dialogue to be measured precisely enough for superimposed titles synchronized to the dialogue to be added to the film. Weinberg’s account of the early experiments with subtitles (quoted in Nornes 2007: 149–150) shows how subtitles were very selective at first. This is borne out by the very low subtitle counts of the first films shown with subtitles in English, as well as by Nornes’ own findings for the Japanese context (ibid.: 170–171). Films gradually became more densely subtitled, in the sense of having a greater number of subtitles, over the following decades.

**History of dubbing**

Strategies to overcome linguistic barriers during the transition to talking cinema were commercially motivated. Subtitling was restricted to limited audiences, and the multilinguals
lacked the box-office potential of the original stars, who were replaced by lesser-known actors in the foreign versions. During the same period, a number of Hollywood studios worked on a method to maintain their commercial assets abroad. Substituting the original American voices with those of actors performing in other languages seemed promising. This would preserve the main appeal of American films for foreign audiences by allowing them to see the stars on the screen, while being able to understand what they said in the audiences’ languages.

Such methods were initially developed in the USA and in Germany which, as the biggest European film-producing country, was interested in distributing its films internationally, throughout Europe and in America. There were experiments in substituting voices during the shooting, with a sort of ‘live dubbing’, but these were thwarted by problems in achieving the proper synchronization of the images of the screen actors and ‘their’ speech (Cornu 2014: 94–95, 96–103). With the development and improvement of the re-recording technique and multi-track sound mixing, dubbing became possible as a specific form of post-synchronization: it substituted the original voices after shooting, by recording the dialogue in other languages in a studio and matching the existing lip movements with the new vocal sounds as closely as possible.

From a technical point of view, two major methods proved relatively satisfactory. One consisted of actors learning the translated dialogue by heart before recording a scene or fragment of a scene, while watching the original film without sound. Dubbing actors had to deliver their lines while following the facial and lip movements as best as they could to give the illusion that their voices belonged to the characters on the screen. The challenge for them was to sound as natural as possible when performing under such constraints. The other method comprised a mechanical system which broke down all the lines into minute sections based on the lip movements. Such information was transcribed on a strip of paper or celluloid that ran simultaneously with the film, but at a lower speed, to maintain constant synchronicity. This strip was then used by translators endeavouring to write dialogue that would match the lip movements. The translated lines were transcribed in turn on a similar strip, called the *rhythmo-band* (London 1936: 115), which was projected in synchronization with the film, but on a separate screen. To make lip synchronization as accurate as possible, dubbing actors had to say their lines exactly as each syllable went past a vertical bar on the separate screen. The first ‘empirical’ method was used in some Hollywood studios and their dubbing facilities in France, and known as *doublage à l’image* (‘image-guided dubbing’). Although invented in Germany, the *rhythmo-band* method was little used in its home country, but was commercially developed in France, along with a similar system invented by a French engineer. It became known there as *doublage à la bande* (‘band-guided dubbing’) (Cornu 2014: 103–124).

Prior to recording, the translation of dialogue was also a delicate stage of the dubbing process. In the early 1930s, translators of dubbed films would often be good writers, though not necessarily professional translators. The original dialogue of a film was fully translated by an anonymous translator, and then reworked or ‘adapted’ to the specific dubbing constraints by a dialogue writer (Cornu 2014: 144).

While commercial circumstances contributed to the development of dubbing, this translation method was also fostered by legal and political contexts. In Italy, dubbing was used as a weapon with which Mussolini’s fascist regime consolidated its prohibition of foreign languages in cinemas. As part of this nationalist policy, a 1933 decree only allowed Italian-dubbed versions made in Italy for release (Mereu Keating 2016: 18, and see section above on ‘Audiovisual translation and the transition to sound’). For similar reasons, from 1941 Francoist Spain also imposed dubbed versions as the only form of foreign films allowed on its screens, with a very limited opening to subtitled versions after 1946 (Garnemark 2012). In both countries, all foreign films were heavily censored.
The major market for Hollywood films in the early 1930s, France quickly introduced legislation making it compulsory for dubbed versions to be made on French territory as of 1932. This move abruptly stopped the making of French-dubbed versions in Hollywood. It is important to note that, unlike Italy and, later, Spain, the French authorities never attributed this policy to nationalist politics. They acted in response to pressure from the film industry itself, in particular the distribution and exhibition sectors (Cornu 2014: 58).

China offers another interesting situation where politics and ideology heavily interfered with the distribution of foreign films. Shortly after Mao’s ascent to power in 1949, a limited number of foreign films started to be released, only in dubbed versions and after severe ideological intervention. They mostly came from other Communist countries or were Western European productions deemed ‘progressive’ by the Chinese regime, such as Vittorio de Sica’s neorealist Bicycle Thieves (Chen 2014).

Today, dubbing continues to be a thriving section of the film industry in Italy, Spain, Germany and France. It is much less used in other European countries where subtitling was adopted at an early stage or where foreign films are less widely released, as in the UK. English-dubbed films are a rarity in English-speaking countries.

More expensive than subtitling, dubbing remains widely used in national film industries which can afford it. In countries such as Germany, Italy, Spain and France, it is not restricted to cinema, and television programming heavily depends on dubbed films. In Germany, viewers’ attitudes and the strength of the dubbing industry have led to the virtual disappearance of subtitled films in cinemas. A similar trend can be observed in Austria and Switzerland (Boillat 2013: 145). However, the situation is somewhat special in France where distributors’ marketing habits and viewers’ behaviour still strongly favour dubbing, and yet the demand for subtitled films is relatively high.

**Audiovisual translation and the ‘foreign film’**

Film translation into English invites us to adopt different methodological and interpretive frames; it is, after all, translation against the current of the film trade. The concept of the ‘foreign film’ is central here. We may define the ‘foreign film’ as a film that requires translation for the purposes of distribution or importation, usually from an Anglophone perspective. ‘Foreign films’ in the UK originally included imports from other English-speaking countries, but now it refers, more or less, to the body of films originally shot in a language that is not English. Considerable work has been done on international co-productions and the linguistic issues they raise (see e.g. Betz 2001; Jäckel 2003). Histories of the foreign film are marked by the challenges of distributing dubbed or subtitled films in English-language markets (see e.g. McDonald 2009). Key moments have been identified when foreign films enjoyed relative success at the UK and US box offices; these include the early years of sound (cf. Mazdon and Wheatley 2013: 31, Porter 2010) and the period immediately following the Second World War. This success was never more than relative; as Balio (2010: 301) points out, ‘during the 1950s [a boom time for the importation of foreign films with English subtitles or (more rarely) dubbed dialogue] foreign films accounted for as much as 7 per cent of the total U.S. box office each year, whereas since 1970 they have accounted for around 2 percent on average.’

**Current issues and new debates**

The history of AVT is a very new field that links translation studies and film studies. It can fruitfully contribute to enrich our knowledge of how AVT evolved, and the impact it has
had on distribution and reception. In recent years, a number of issues have been studied by translation studies specialists and film historians. Some of them concern the already mentioned multilinguals, ideological censorship and political issues (Danan 1991, 1999; Diaz Cintas 2012; Chomentowski 2014), the technological and commercial development of dubbing and subtitling (Danan 1996, Cornu 2014), and debates on the pros and cons of both methods as discussed in film magazines since the advent of sound cinema. Many of these issues need more in-depth studies, especially in regions of the world where they have not yet been researched. For example, the history of dubbing is becoming clearer in the European countries where it has been most in use (France, Italy, Spain), but we need to know more about its development in Germany, and in other countries and continents such as India and Latin America.

Future issues include the history of more recent practices such as voice-over translation, redubbing and resubtitling (the making of new dubbed and subtitled versions of older films). Studying reception is all the more crucial as data are scarce, regardless of the historical period. The impact of film and AVT on film style is also a fascinating aesthetic issue which has hardly been touched upon. Because of assumptions based on the ‘speechless’ nature of silent cinema, the history of translation practices in the silent era has been typically neglected. It covers a set of major issues which would help us understand better how films were circulated worldwide, how titled cards were translated or adapted outside the linguistic boundaries of the films, and who was responsible for the content and look of the translated titles.

The stumbling block for most of these research areas is the access to the films themselves as primary sources (see e.g. Ďurovičová 2004). Much material is lost or not properly identified in film archives (e.g. silent film prints; early sound dubbed and subtitled prints; television broadcast versions). Many silent films may exist only in languages other than their original language, which may make them difficult to identify. A key problem is that translated copies of films from the pre-digital period are, by definition, not usable as ‘originals’ and may be preserved neither by archives in the target culture nor in the source culture. Where prints survive, they may be physically fragile because of their nitrate film base, subject to shrinkage and potentially impossible to project. Many film copies in circulation are unapproved or illegal prints that can be difficult or impossible to authenticate.

The history of the early stages of AVT raises specific problems as researchers cannot just rely on the few films available on DVDs which often don’t carry the dubbed or subtitled versions made for their initial theatrical release. This is where film archives have a major part to play, in cataloguing and giving access to the existing prints of such versions. The contributions of researchers, audiovisual translators, film archivists and curators are all vital if they are to uncover this period of audiovisual history. Among other difficulties, they face the decay and loss of prints; they have to authenticate the unapproved prints in which many of the early versions circulate; they must go against the low status audiovisual translation has had as a result of the ‘auteur’ emphasis of film history. Their findings and methodology will be essential to make the history of more recent periods and, indeed, future ones.

Primary sources also include ‘non-film’ material, such as reviews, distribution and publicity material, dubbed dialogue lists, subtitle lists, oral history, etc. This category of documents is enormously valuable, especially when prints are no longer extant or not yet identified. The Media History Digital Library (Media Library, n.d.), with its ‘Lantern’ platform, which at time of writing has scanned more than 1.3 million pages of media periodicals, is a major step forward from this perspective.

Much translation studies research depends on the availability of text pairs. The instability of the film medium, particularly in the silent period, means that it can be difficult, and in some
contexts impossible, to establish pairs of film texts which can be shown to stand to each other in the relation of source text and target text. Paolo Cherchi Usai has commented that ‘every copy of the same silent film is different, thanks to the intervention of time, storage conditions, projectionists, editors, colourists, thieves, producers, distributors, re-issuers, titlers, re-titlers, censors, overenthusiastic archivists, incompetent archivists, and practically everyone else who ever came in contact with it’ (2000: xi). Versions for export could be physically different versions, shot on a second camera on the same set (*ibid.*: 11). Even though tampering with sound film is not as easily achieved, the presence of censorship, pressures of programme length and other factors mean that even in the sound period ‘original’ and translated film texts may not align.

- The lack of attribution of AVT means that tracking resubtitling, in particular, becomes more difficult. Critical interest has only recently begun to rise into the question of retranslation of film and television (see Zanotti 2015: 110), which may help to illustrate how the norms of censorship and attenuation, linguistic conventions and subtitle density have developed over time.
- It can be difficult to find detailed reception data. Press data is inevitably partial. Published or unpublished letters and diaries from professionals may contain some valuable data (see e.g. Chantal 1977, Eisenschitz 1999). Initiatives such as British Film Institute archivist Luke McKernan’s ‘Picturegoing’ project (Picturegoing, n.d.) are to be welcomed, even if the data from such projects will inevitably remain at an anecdotal level.
- There is a not inconsiderable language barrier in research; much of the research in this area has been done in French, Italian, Spanish and German. More research published in English, or translated into English, would certainly widen the field at the international level. Translation initiatives such as that of Wahl (2009) are greatly to be encouraged in this regard.
- The overwhelming emphasis so far has been on fiction film. This parallels in interesting ways the predominant emphasis on literary translation in translation studies more widely, but there is a vast corpus of documentaries, educational films and industrial films which were also subjected to translation and which deserve study in their own right.
- A major need for research in this field is to explore to what extent the specificity of a given audiovisual translation is significant; in other words, to what extent it makes a measurable difference to the reception of a film. Jeremy Hicks (2005) has shown in relation to the early Soviet sound film *Chapaev* (Vasilyev Brothers, 1934) that the different translations in the UK, where the film was given title cards by Ivor Montague for the Film Society, and the US, where it was more conventionally subtitled, led to very different degrees of success for the film in the different markets. This fascinating study does not go into detail about the translations themselves, but there is no indication in Hicks’ article that copies of the titled, or subtitled, prints of the period survive. Given the period of several years of experimentation during the transition to sound, when audiences’ displeasure with the quality of translation was often relayed through press reports, it would be very interesting to consider how the reception of other films may have been directly affected by the quality of the translation.

**Research methods**

AVT history has taken rather an eclectic approach to research methods. One of the most interesting and scholarly approaches comes from film studies, with the work of Charles O’Brien (2005, 2010), who has also taken a quantitative approach through his Cinemetries...
site (Cinemetrics, n.d.). Together with other researchers, O’Brien counts ‘shots and time[s] film lengths to calculate the average shot lengths [and hence the cutting rate] of the films’ (ibid.), which helps him explain patterns and changes in the rhythm of films.

Another interesting methodological approach is that of Ďurovičová who, with a number of colleagues, led a Spring School in film studies research on multiple-language versions at Gradisca in Italy (2003–2006) where multiple versions of the ‘same’ film were screened (Ďurovičová 2004). This gave rise to three volumes, mostly consisting of case studies, the usefully detailed nature of which is a tribute to a project based around public screenings, rather than comparisons of film prints on parallel viewing tables.

One of the methodological problems is that some of the most methodologically aware work in AVT history has not put translation to the fore. This gap in research and method remains to be filled.

Summary

The historiography of AVT is still a work in progress. Some periods and specific types of film translation are now more clearly defined. The multilingual versions made throughout the 1930s are perhaps the best example. However, multilinguals were produced again after the Second World War at least up to the 1950s, although on a much more limited scale, often within international co-production projects. These would need to be investigated more thoroughly. The silent era is another, crucial, unexplored period that has much to teach us about the emergence of translation practices in cinema. Dubbing and subtitling developed and expanded in very distinctive ways according to the period of film history and the linguistic and film-industrial areas, and must also be studied in relation to commercial strategies and ideological contexts. Many historical issues of AVT indeed remain uncharted territory. Researching the history of this particular form of translation may also contribute to a better understanding of what makes a film and how it is perceived.

Further reading

Cornu, J.-F. (2014) Le doublage et le sous-titrage: histoire et esthétique, Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes | A comprehensive study of historical developments and aesthetic issues in dubbing and subtitling into French. It shows that film translation practices go beyond mere technical operations in their implications on the audiovisual content of a film and argues that the reception of films has always been dependent on the choice of translation mode.


History of audiovisual translation

Nornes, A. M. (2007) *Cinema Babel*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press | An eclectic and pioneering combination of approaches to film translation history, including a provocative essay on subtitling and one of the most comprehensive available treatments of translation in silent film.


**Related topics**

3  Subtitling on the cusp of its futures
4  Investigating dubbing: learning from the past, looking to the future
11 Film remakes as a form of translation
12 Mediality and audiovisual translation
25 Minority languages, language planning and audiovisual translation
31 Accessible filmmaking: translation and accessibility from production

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Media Library (n.d.) Media History Digital Library. Available online: http://mediahistoryproject.org/ [last access 20 December 2017].


Picturegoing (n.d.) ‘Picturegoing: Eyewitness Accounts of Viewing Pictures’. Available online: http://picturegoing.com/ [last access 20 December 2017].


**Filmography**


*Atlantic* (1929) Éwald André Dupont. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0019658/?ref_=fn_al_tt_2

*Bicycle Thieves* (1948) Vittorio de Sica. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0040522/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1

*Chapaev* (1934) Sergei Vasilyev and Georgi Vasilyev. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0024966/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1
Der Kongress tanzt (1931) Erik Charell. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0022034/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1

Hell's Angels (1930) Howard Hughes. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0020960/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1

Kameradschaft (1931) Georg Wilhelm Pabst. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0022204/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1


Le Million (1931) René Clair. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0022150/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1

Le Silence est d’or/Man About Town (1947) René Clair. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0039823/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1


Mädchen in Uniform (1931) Leontine Sagan. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0022183/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1

Niemandsland (1931) Victor Trivas. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0022204/?ref_=fn_al_tt_2

Prix de beauté (1930) Augusto Genina. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0021273/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1

Seas Beneath (1931) John Ford. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0022353/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1

Sunrise (1927) F. W. Murnau. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0018455/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1

The Jazz Singer (1927) Alan Crosland. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0018037/?ref_=nv_sr_2

The Ring (1927) Alfred Hitchcock. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0018328/?ref_=nv_sr_1

Westfront 1918 (1930) Georg Wilhelm. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0021542/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1
