Audiovisual translation and audience reception

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Introduction

Although descriptive translation studies (Toury 1995) has paid significant attention to the study of the target culture in translational encounters, studies on the reception of translations are still scarce within our discipline (Suojanen et al. 2015). Audiovisual translation (AVT) has shown relatively more interest in the study of users and the conditions in which translations are used and enjoyed. Still, we need to know more about how people make sense of translated audiovisual products, and how said products affect their lives. Admittedly, the last few years have witnessed important developments on this front. However, most experiments tend to concentrate on case studies, and are restricted to one mode of AVT, so their contribution to knowledge remains limited.

The contribution of reception studies to AVT has been acknowledged since the inception of empirical research in the 1990s. As early as in 1995, Kovačič highlighted the importance of understanding how viewers receive subtitled content. She argued that subtitlers normally work with a non-existent ideal viewer on their minds—a viewer who differs from the actual individuals who will eventually consume audiovisual programmes. Although her discussion was restricted to subtitled content, she argued that this premise also applies to other AVT modalities, for all translational decisions are constrained by the profile of the viewers that translators have in mind. It is thus necessary to build that viewer’s profile with evidence-based insights gathered through empirical studies. The construction of this profile can be informed by (i) how viewers process translated content; (ii) the way in which translation affects their comprehension process; and (iii) the social dimension of the translated material, understood as the effects of translated content on audiences and their preferences. But, as Gambier (2003: 184) notes almost one decade later in a publication that continues to inspire most studies on reception, ‘we continually make reference to readers, viewers, consumers, users, etc.’ even though ‘[v]ery few studies have dealt with the issue of reception in screen translation, and even fewer have looked at it empirically’ (ibid.).

The lack of terminological consensus among scholars working on translation reception prompted Chesterman (2007) to propose an agreed set of terms. Chesterman recognizes that translations act as causes and produce effects which can be best studied within the
receiving culture. Similarly to Kovačič (1995), Chesterman further argues that translations cause reactions, responses and repercussions. This 3 Rs model informs Gambier’s (2006) proposed framework to study the reception of translated audiovisual products at three different levels: reactions on the psycho-cognitive level; responses on the perceptual level; and repercussions, understood both as attitudinal issues pertaining to the viewer’s preferences and habits, as well as to the wider sociocultural dimension of the context in which the products are received (Gambier 2006, 2009). This model is often quoted by scholars specializing in the study of reception in AVT studies (e.g. Caffrey 2009, Tuominen 2012, Orrego-Carmona 2015).

This chapter surveys the significant growth that reception studies have experienced during the last decade, driven by the popularization of eye tracking as a research method and the scholarly community’s growing interest in accessibility, which is widely supported by research funding schemes. Despite such advances, more efforts are still needed to equip ourselves with relevant theoretical frameworks and to fine-tune the methods available for the study of reception, if we are to come up with reliable findings in this research domain.

**Research methods for audience reception in translation studies**

Translation studies scholars have resorted to an array of methods to collect data on reception: questionnaires and eye tracking have probably become the most common ones, although interviews, direct observation, and focus groups have also been applied (Suojanen et al. 2015). De Linde and Kay (1999: 35) propose a typology of methods to investigate the reception of subtitling, which involve different degrees of control on the research design on the part of the analyst:

- survey methods elicit viewers’ responses to questions about their experience of subtitled television;
- semi-controlled experiments examine viewers’ responses to different sets of pre-categorized subtitles;
- controlled experiments place constraints on ‘both medium and viewer in order to gain precise behavioural information about how particular subtitle characteristics are received’ *(ibid.)*.

Semi-controlled and controlled experiment methods have been more popular among translation studies scholars. In the former, researchers identify specific features of the audiovisual product or translation they are interested in, and set out to gauge the effects those features have on viewers. This method differs from the survey method in that it maintains the same conditions for all participants. Apart from restricting the input in various ways, controlled experiments also record the viewers’ ‘actual motor behaviour’ *(ibid.: 37)*. De Linde and Kay refer specifically to recording eye movements, but there are other biometric indicators such as heart rate, skin conductance and electroencephalogram (EEG) measurements. These methods are normally combined with questionnaires, which are very time-efficient, to elicit viewers’ reactions and opinions.

Each data collection method has its own strengths and weaknesses. For example, questionnaires enable the collection of big amounts of information in a relatively short period of time, but often yield unreliable self-reported data. For its part, eye tracking yields useful insights into attention distribution, but offers little information on the causes of viewers’ behaviour. Additionally, eye-tracking equipment is expensive and the data collection
process is technically demanding, as it produces large amounts of data that require specific knowledge to be processed, interpreted and presented. Interviews, on the other hand, are more time consuming than questionnaires because they require a longer preparation and transcription time. Finally, direct observation and focus groups provide vast qualitative data, but rely significantly on the researchers’ subjectivity and the participant’s self-reporting. While they make data transcription and processing more time consuming, these methods allow participants to behave more naturally.

Although there are single-method projects, mainly those revolving around questionnaires or interviews, using a combination of methods to allow for data validation is ever more common. Mixed-methods approaches make it possible to confront results secured through different methods, thus producing higher quality and more comprehensive data. Judging by recent publications and projects under development, it is safe to assume that, as far as reception studies in AVT are concerned, triangulation and mixed methods are becoming the norm.

**Reception studies in AVT**

In what follows, I will introduce empirical reception studies that have been conducted within AVT. As will become evident, it is common for this type of studies to test the reception of more than one aspect of the translation and involve a combination of methods. The categorization adopted here is therefore meant for presentation purposes only.

**Subtitling studies using eye tracking**

Eye-tracking methods have featured in AVT research since the inception of this area of scholarly enquiry. Some of the first and most influential studies on the reception of subtitles were carried out by cognitive psychologist d’Ydewalle and his colleagues at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. Since 1985, d’Ydewalle and his group have been concerned with the study of subtitle reading and its implications for language learning. D’Ydewalle et al. (1985: 381) found evidence to suggest that subtitle reading differs from typical reading behaviour. Instead of reading the subtitles in their entirety, the participants in their study ‘first look[ed] at the visual image, jump[ed] quite accurately to the keywords of the subtitle (i.e., the words conveying the most important parts of the conversation) and then [went] back to the visual image.’ If there happened to be any time left, some participants would return to the subtitle area and read the entire subtitles. Subsequent studies (d’Ydewalle et al. 1987), however, found subtitle reading to be ‘a more or less’ automatic behaviour. Contrary to what the 1985 study indicated, d’Ydewalle et al. (1987) found that viewers cannot avoid reading subtitles, even when they understand the source language of the audiovisual text they were presented with. None of these publications provides a complete description of the experiment: the lack of specific information on the number of participants or the translated audiovisual product complicates the interpretation of the results. Nevertheless, their findings—which laid the foundations for subsequent studies—demonstrated that the reaction of viewers of subtitled programmes react to this form of visual input in a somewhat automated manner, with the degree of automation varying according to other factors. These findings informed the formulation of new hypotheses to be tested in other experiments. Following an experiment with children, d’Ydewalle and van Rensbergen (1989) show that subtitle reading behaviour depends on the type of content presented to the viewer and is not fully automatic. When watching cartoons with dense dialogue, for example, children’s gaze patterns resembled
those of adult viewers; by contrast, they relied less on the subtitles when they watched action-oriented content.

In yet another study, d’Ydewalle et al. (1991) tested the use of intralingual subtitles—i.e. subtitles in the same language as the soundtrack dialogue—by English native speakers who were not used to viewing subtitled content, and Dutch native speakers who were. Both groups spent a considerable amount of time viewing the subtitles, which seemed to indicate that participants who are used to subtitling also look at the area of the frame where subtitles are featured, even if they understand the spoken language, and regardless of their familiarity with subtitles as a form of AVT. However, on this occasion, the researchers found there was a degree of control in subtitle reading that, admittedly, coexists with the more dominant automatic behaviour. Using news broadcast as input for their experiment, d’Ydewalle and Gielen (1992) showed that viewers look longer at the subtitle area when the audiovisual product conveys a significant amount of information in a short period of time. The participants viewed the subtitles during longer periods and at a faster pace, even when the news broadcast was in their own language.

Koolstra et al. (1999) also drew on eye tracking to investigate empirically the rationale for the industry’s adherence to the ‘six-second rule’. In their experiment, subtitles were shown at three different speeds (6, 8 and 10 seconds per subtitle). They found that the longer the subtitles remained on the screen, the longer viewers, in this case children, would spend looking at the subtitle area. Poorer readers spent only around 30 per cent of the time looking at the six-second subtitles (much less than other participants), but dedicated more time to reading ten-second subtitles. It was concluded that viewers with poorer reading skills were put off by the faster subtitles, but were more willing to make an effort to process the slower subtitles.

The studies surveyed so far have mostly focused on attention allocation. However, d’Ydewalle and de Bruycker (2007) have examined other aspects of reception, studying the reading behaviour of children and adults when watching videos with interlingual subtitles (subtitles that translate the foreign speech into the viewers’ native language) and reversed subtitling (i.e. foreign language subtitles conveying the content of the native language soundtrack). Participants presented with interlingual subtitles skipped fewer of them and spent more time viewing the subtitle area. The focus on the actual reading of the subtitles, rather than the distribution of attention between the subtitle and the image area, was also addressed by Kruger and Steyn (2014) who explored the reception of interlingual subtitles in subtitled academic lectures that are offered within English-medium learning environments.

With the exception of Kruger and Steyn (ibid.), all the previous studies assess the reception of translated audiovisual products from a psycholinguistic perspective. In recent years, however, eye tracking has been employed ever more frequently by translation studies scholars in productive ways. In a study measuring performance and analyzing eye movements, Perego et al. (2010) assessed viewers’ reactions to subtitle segmentation while watching a subtitled excerpt of a Hungarian film. The subtitles were created specifically for their experiment. The control condition involved the use of subtitles that followed professional subtitling standards, while subtitle segmentation in the treatment condition failed to adhere to those standards. Findings suggest that participants spent an average of 67 per cent of the time looking at the subtitle area. On the whole, subtitled segmentation was not found to have an effect on cognitive processes—as all participants performed well in the recognition of subtitles and scenes.

In order to test the effects of condensation in subtitles, Ghia (2012) compared the reception of literal and non-literal Italian subtitles for an English soundtrack. Gaze data revealed
that non-literal translation caused more deflections (i.e. eye movements when the viewer first looks at the subtitle, then focuses on the image before returning to the subtitle area again) from the participants. The higher number of deflections occurred with condensed subtitles, which indicates that viewers’ behaviour can be affected by different translation strategies. This might also imply that participants were following and comparing the English dialogue with the Italian subtitles.

Another study exploring specific characteristics of subtitling—in this case, word frequency and cohesion—is presented in Moran (2012). Intuitively, the findings of the study indicate that the presence of high-frequency words in the subtitles facilitates subtitle reading. The group of participants who watched the subtitles with the high-frequency words had ‘significantly lower fixation durations associated with reading the subtitle, spent significantly more time viewing the image and scored better in the post-experiment questionnaire’ (ibid.: 215). The subtitles in the high-cohesion condition also prompted better results and allowed the participants to spend more time on the image, which might be considered as a strong argument against reduction in subtitling—crucially, subtitles featuring high cohesion and high-frequency words contained more characters than their alternative conditions. Moran suggests that instead of focusing on character count, subtitling should be looking more at facilitating reading.

Exploring a different application of subtitles, Kruger et al. (2013b) assessed the benefits of using intralingual subtitles in education. Their purpose was to gauge the cognitive load that students had to manage while watching academic lectures with and without intralingual subtitles. The authors used a wide range of data collection methods in their study: eye tracking (pupil dilation), EEG, self-reported ratings and performance measures. The study showed that subtitles proved to be beneficial in these circumstances: they helped students by facilitating the processing and comprehension of the lecture. Further, the students who watched the subtitled version operated under a lower cognitive load than those who watched the non-subtitled version. Additionally, Kruger (2014) found that subtitles are not only cognitively effective, but also have a positive impact on immersion and enjoyment. The study included 88 university students with different mother tongues (English, Chinese, Japanese and Korean) who watched an excerpt with or without intralingual subtitles.

Eye tracking has also served to test experimental uses of subtitles. Bucaria and Chiaro (2007), for example, found that there are sociocultural gaps in the encyclopaedic knowledge of viewers which obscure comprehension, and suggested the possibility ‘for screen translation to be integrated with extra information to make up for possible gaps in the sociocultural context’ (ibid.: 115). Other subtitling studies have explored the viewer’s reaction to this additional explanatory text on the screen. Caffrey (2009) makes use of eye tracking and questionnaires to study the cognitive effort required from participants who watch anime subtitled in English, both with and without additional pop-up glosses explaining culturally marked elements that feature in the audiovisual material at the centre of the study. The results suggest that increased processing effort is required when a pop-up gloss is on screen, which results in less processing time allocated to the subtitle and a greater number of skipped subtitles. However, the study did find that participants had a better understanding of culturally marked items when they watched the videos with pop-up glosses, even though their presence gave participants in the treatment condition the impression that the subtitles were too fast. Interestingly, and in line with the findings of other studies (d’Ydewalle and Gielen 1992, de Linde and Kay 1999), Caffrey found that, when there was more information on the screen (subtitles plus glosses), the participants read the subtitles faster.
Künzli and Ehrensberger-Dow (2011) studied the audience’s response to standard subtitles and standard subtitles combined with surtitles, i.e. snippets of text that appear at the top of the screen and offer metalinguistic information on specific cultural references mentioned in the subtitles. They concluded that the material using the combination of standard subtitles and surtitles incurred a higher cognitive load, but ‘participants’ performance in terms of retention of various verbal and visual elements in the movie excerpts was identical in the two conditions’ (2011: 197). Additionally, since the participants’ reception capacity was not affected, Künzli and Ehrensberger-Dow (ibid.) argued that viewers are able to process a larger amount of information than previously conceived without compromising their comprehension or enjoyment, but warned that using surtitles for an entire film could yield different results, such as fatigue and/or reduced reception capacity. Künzli and Ehrensberger-Dow also stress that viewers’ acceptance of innovative subtitling might be contingent on the age and literacy level of individual users. However, a similar experiment using Portuguese surtitles to gloss cultural items mentioned in the Portuguese subtitled version of a Finnish film (Ramos Pinto 2013) found some of the viewers made deliberate decisions on whether or not to follow the surtitles and thus achieved greater surtitle processing efficiency.

Focusing on young audiences, Orrego-Carmona (2015) analyzed whether there were any differences between the reception of subtitled audiovisual products produced by professional and non-professional subtitlers. The study, which was was carried out in Spain and involved 52 young participants, found no differences in terms of reception. Orrego-Carmona also looked at whether and how the viewers’ knowledge of the source language of the audiovisual content affects subtitle-reading behaviour. Results indicate that, while participants with a low level of proficiency are highly dependent on the subtitles, the behaviour of those viewers with a higher level of proficiency is variable and results in different viewing experiences.

Advances in the study of reception have paved the way for studies that are not necessarily confined to material subtitled during post-production. Romero-Fresco (2013) advocates that AVT and accessibility should be given serious consideration as early as in the pre-production stage of filmmaking. Likewise, Fox (2016) has developed the concept of ‘integrated titles’ to designate subtitles that are not confined to the bottom of the screen, but can feature in any region of the frame instead. Fox’s study begins by identifying the natural focus point of the visual composition by tracking the eye movements of native speakers. Then, she proceeds to place the integrated subtitles around the focal areas of the image, as delineated by the viewing patterns. Results suggest that viewers invest less time reading integrated subtitles than their regular counterparts, and are more likely to return faster to the focal points in the image.

**Reception of humour and culture-specific items**

The translation of humour and cultural references in general has also been studied from a reception-based perspective. Fuentes Luque (2003) used direct observation to explore the reception of translated humour from English into Spanish. The data collection involved the direct observation of participants’ reactions during the screening of a dubbed film, the completion of a questionnaire by the experiment participants, and a brief interview with the participants. The cohort of 30 participants was divided into three different experiment conditions. The original English film, the dubbed Spanish version, and the subtitled Spanish version were thus watched by ten viewers each. Fuentes Luque’s study—based on a small sample of participants with ages ranging from 16 to 64—found that participants watching the translated versions showed a less positive reception of humour elements than that of viewers who watched the original version in English.
The University of Bologna-Forlì (Italy) is home to a cluster of researchers studying the reception of humour and cultural references in audiovisual content subtitled and dubbed into Italian. Chiaro (2004) used questionnaires to collect data on the perception of verbally expressed humour dubbed into Italian. Antonini (2005) used an adapted humour-appreciation test involving a sample of 32 participants to study the reception of verbally expressed humour, visual humour and satire. The results show participants had problems understanding subtitled verbal humour although, surprisingly, participants were able to recreate puns that were not present in the subtitles. Antonini suggests this could be prompted by the canned laughter in the material used in this study, which raises questions as to whether, and to what extent, the original soundtrack influences viewers’ behaviour and comprehension.

The composition of the sample used in Bucaria and Chiaro (2007) to study end user perception of Italian dubbing included cinema and TV experts, linguists, dubbing practitioners, and members of the general audience. The findings suggest that, as Italian audiences become more familiar with foreign cultures, they are more tolerant of ‘dubbese’—which designates, in this case, the variety of Italian used by the dubbing industry to transpose both fictional and non-fictional foreign TV and cinema productions—and makes it more difficult for the audience to differentiate between ‘what is and is not real spoken Italian’ (Bucaria and Chiaro 2007: 115). In another study about dubbese, Antonini (2008) uses an online questionnaire to test the participants’ understanding of translated content. This study reports that most of the participants’ declared understanding differs greatly from their actual understanding of the translated content: while more than 60 per cent of the respondents declared they understood the cultural references through the Italian translation, in 70 per cent of the cases they did not actually understand them. This raises concerns about the reliability of self-reported comprehension methods and accentuates the need for triangulation. Other studies on the Italian audience’s perception of dubbese (Antonini and Chiaro 2009) found that the features of dubbese language are recognized as such by respondents, and that this phenomenon is understood and accepted as a special variety of Italian.

Chiaro (2007) also explores the reception of humour and culture-specific references in the context of AVT. This study sets out to examine how audiences perceive verbally expressed humour comparing the reaction of 34 Italian viewers and 22 British informants to original, dubbed or subtitled content. A small disparity can be observed in the results, with British participants giving higher scores to verbally expressed humour than their Italian counterparts—which lends support to Fuentes Luque’s (2003) suggestion that the reception of humour is culture-specific.

Accessibility studies

Intralingual and interlingual subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing (SDH) has become a prolific area of reception-related scholarship. While the United Kingdom and the USA have conducted research in this area since the 1990s, SDH is now receiving more scholarly attention in Spain, Poland, Italy, Portugal, and Belgium, against the background of growing public support to accessibility. Indeed, in recent years, a wide range of countries, including but not restricted to EU member states, have passed legislation that requires TV channels and distributors to comply with a quota of accessible content in their programming.

Gottlieb (1995) relied on a ‘protest button’ to elicit the reactions of 123 deaf or hard-of-hearing viewers to subtitled material. Interestingly, he found that participants did not react to subtitles that were faulty according to professional standards; instead, subtitles that had been condensed in compliance with industrial conventions were perceived as
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faulty subtitles. This study demonstrated that participants’ views of subtitling quality do not necessarily lend support to practices informed by professional subtitling standards. Admittedly, asking participants to assess the subtitles while they are watching audiovisual content could have affected the ecological validity of the experiment. Apart from having to divide their attention between the image and the subtitles, participants also had to be aware of the button and remain alert to judge the translations, which results in a non-natural viewing experience.

De Linde and Kay (1999) present a series of experiments testing a range of features that are of relevance to accessibility: subtitle rate, onset of speech, shot changes, and subtitle editing. Their analysis relies mostly on eye-movement measurements but also on the participants’ comprehension of the content. In all cases, the sound of the clips was off, so that participants (10 hearing and 10 deaf participants) would have to rely solely on the subtitles for verbal information. While this experiment enabled the study of the hearing participants’ performance under the same conditions as deaf participants, its findings do not lend themselves to comparison with the findings of other studies involving hearing participants with access to the soundtrack. Similarly to d’Ydewalle and Gielen (1992), de Linde and Kay (1999) found that subtitle pace affects reading speed: the faster the subtitles, the faster people read them. They also observed that slow subtitles induce re-reading, proving that both extremes, slow and fast subtitles, have a direct impact on viewers’ behaviour. Interestingly, deaf viewers seemed to rely more on the image as a source of information, which suggests that impaired viewers engage differently with images.

In one of a series of studies on SDH undertaken in the USA (Jensema 1998), a sample of 578 participants consisting of deaf, hard of hearing and hearing viewers reported that 145 words per minute was a comfortable subtitle-reading speed—although they adapted well to an increased presentation rate of up to 171 words per minute. Jensema, Danturthi and Burch (2000) found the presence of subtitles drastically changed the behaviour of the six participants in their study and turned the viewing process into a reading activity. When watching subtitled content, subtitle reading takes over as the primary activity, while viewing the action becomes secondary. In a larger study (Jensema, el Sharkawy et al. 2000) collected eye-movement data from 23 participants watching subtitled television programmes. The results indicated that participants spent 84 per cent of their time looking at the subtitles, and there was little variation (82 per cent-86 per cent) when the subtitle speed increased from 100 to 180 words per minute. Additionally, this experiment revealed that age and sex did not have an impact on viewers’ behaviour—thus contradicting the findings of other studies (d’Ydewalle et al. 1987, de Bruycker and d’Ydewalle 2003). Although the education level of participants seemed to be a significant variable, the size of the data set was too small to allow for robust conclusions on this matter.

Szarkowska et al. (2013) report on a series of experiments conducted to test SDH and audio description (AD). In one of the studies, they tested three different types of subtitles: edited (simplified and reduced) subtitles, standard subtitles and verbatim subtitles. The group of 40 participants in the study included deaf, hard of hearing and hearing people. Edited subtitles were found to allow participants to look at the image for longer, while their verbatim counterparts received better comprehension scores. However, it was also in this version that the participants fixated on the subtitles the most. The authors draw attention to various contradictory findings: most participants’ preferred translation mode was not the one that produced the best comprehension scores.

As noted above, research on accessibility has been stimulated by growing financial and institutional support. The cross-national project DTV4ALL (2010–2013) funded
by the European Commission aimed to explore the quality of SDH on three areas: ‘what viewers think about SDH, how they understand these subtitles and how they view them’ (Romero-Fresco 2015: 10). The project involved completing a questionnaire to learn about the preferences of 1,365 SDH respondents and conducting an eye-tracking experiment with 103 deaf, hard of hearing and hearing viewers in four of the participating countries (Spain, Poland, Italy and Germany). The results of the questionnaire reveal a very heterogeneous SDH landscape in Europe. While in countries such as Denmark and the UK coverage is not really an issue, in other countries (e.g. Poland, Spain, Germany) there is room for further legislation and more ambitious programming quotas. In terms of subtitle reception, the results of the eye-tracking tests indicate that deaf participants spend more time looking at the subtitles than their hearing or hard of hearing counterparts. This is in sharp contrast with the fact that deaf participants achieved lower scores in terms of average comprehension of the subtitles, although they scored better than participants in other groups on the comprehension of the image tests. As Romero-Fresco puts it, ‘deaf viewers make up for their poor reading skills with a particularly good visual perception comprehension’ (2015: 352).

Another area of accessibility that is attracting more attention is AD. The booming of this relatively recent AVT modality has made it possible for researchers to rely on viewers’ feedback in order to propose standards and guidelines (Chmiel and Mazur 2012). Although there have been sound reception studies conducted in this area, they tend to be small-scale experiments involving few participants and relying mostly on self-reporting questionnaires and interviews. A study exploring the preferences of AD users in Belgium, Germany, Italy, Poland, Portugal and Spain was carried out as part of the ADLAB: Lifelong Access for the Blind project. Chmiel and Mazur (2016) report that the study included 80 visually impaired participants and 77 sighted participants. Two AD versions (narrative and descriptive) of a 20-minute excerpt were translated from English into all the languages of the participating counties, and questionnaires were used to elicit the participants’ preferences and comprehension. The findings do not show significant differences in terms of preferences between the two types of AD.

The subtitling/dubbing debate

The comparison between subtitling and dubbing, one of the longstanding debates in AVT (Koolstra et al. 2002), has also attracted empirical research. Bairstow and Lavau (2012) report on a study comparing dubbing and subtitling. In total, four conditions are included in this experiment: original version in English, dubbed version in French, original version with French subtitles, and a reversed condition (dubbed version with English subtitles). When it comes to the comprehension of dialogue, the dubbed versions score highest, but the degree of comprehension enabled by the version with French subtitles is almost as good. The original version scored the lowest results, due to the participants’ low proficiency in English. For its part, the comparison between subtitling and dubbing conducted by Perego et al. (2015) revealed that subtitling does not affect the viewer’s enjoyment and appreciation of the film when compared to dubbing. However, subtitling provides better support for ‘the lexical aspects of performance’, i.e. ‘the ability to remember face–name associations and specific expressions of dialogues’ (ibid.: 8)

Subtitling, language learning and proficiency in foreign languages

The potential of subtitles to enhance linguistic abilities is one of the reasons why researchers in psychology and education have become interested in exploring the reception of subtitles.
There are two main areas of enquiry in this branch of reception studies. Researchers in the first of such areas have tackled the issue of incidental learning of foreign language with subtitled content, in most cases with a special interest in vocabulary acquisition. Scholars working in the second area have explored how proficiency in the source language of the audiovisual content affects reception.

The incidental educational potential of subtitling is one of the reasons why subtitling is sometimes considered superior to dubbing. In a longitudinal study carried out by Koolstra et al. (1997) 1,050 Dutch elementary school children were tested over a period of three years to analyze the effects of television viewing on their decoding skills. The findings indicate that watching subtitled content on television actually stimulates the development of linguistic decoding. Again, the research group at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven has been prolific in testing the benefits of subtitling for language learning. D’Ydewalle and Pavakanun (1995) tested the reception of cartoons with regular and reversed subtitles and found that they helped with vocabulary learning, although they were relatively less useful for grammar and syntax. D’Ydewalle and van de Poel (1999) obtained promising results when testing students who watched audiovisual content with subtitles and with subtitles and soundtrack. The findings also indicate that participants who watched the content with reversed subtitles outperformed those who watched content with regular subtitles. In an experiment conducted in the United States with beginner learners of Russian as L2, Sydorenko (2010) found that, apart from vocabulary acquisition, subtitles can also improve word-form meaning association—which would seem to indicate that subtitles help in the recognition of written word forms, as well as in the acquisition of word meaning.

In France, based on the findings of Lavaur and Nava (2008), which indicate that subtitles could have a detrimental effect when they are not necessary for viewers, Lavaur and Bairstow (2011) carried out two questionnaire-based studies to test to what extent viewers’ knowledge of the foreign language featured in the soundtrack makes subtitles redundant. Bairstow (2011), on the other hand, reports on an experiment with monolingual and bilingual participants watching a clip in its original version with English soundtrack or with French subtitles. The results suggest that subtitles have a facilitating effect for monolinguals but constitute a distracting element for bilinguals. Of note is the fact that the subtitled version appeared to help monolinguals to understand visual information, and not only to access verbal information in the foreign language. These findings are consistent with those of Taylor’s experiment, where participants who watched condensed subtitles were able to better complement their viewing experience with information from other semiotic modes (Taylor 2003).

Bairstow and Lavaur (2012) argue that participants classed as monolinguals in these studies may have some knowledge of the source (foreign) language—which may influence their engagement with subtitles. This insight prompted Lavaur and Bairstow (2011) to conduct a follow-up experiment testing the same conditions as in the previous study (original English version and interlingual subtitled version in French) but adding an intralingual subtitled version (in English). The high-school students participating in this experiment were divided into three groups depending on their proficiency in English (beginners, intermediate and advanced). The findings confirm that subtitles act as a distraction from visual meaning, but they also help viewers with a low proficiency in the source foreign language to retrieve linguistic information. The three groups of participants showed very different patterns of behaviour. The beginners’ attention to visual semiotics dropped with the presence of English subtitles, and even more with the French subtitles. However, subtitles appeared to significantly facilitate dialogue comprehension. Intermediate participants processed the dialogue
better than visual information in all three conditions, while advanced participants obtained the best results when viewing the original version.

Tuominen (2012) approached this issue from a different angle in an experiment involving focus groups in Finland. In contrast to the studies surveyed above, Tuominen set out to test whether the participants’ formal training in translation influenced their reception of subtitles. The participants were divided into three groups: near-experts (consisting of students majoring in English or translation), and two groups of non-experts. Her results revealed that members of the near-expert group relied heavily on the subtitles and were able to recall them during the focus group discussions. This indicates that participants with the highest proficiency in the source language decided, probably consciously, to read the subtitles as they watched the programme chosen for this experiment. Tuominen also found that all participants, regardless of the variety in their level of proficiency in English, were able to watch the film comfortably and enjoyed it. In Tuominen’s view, the fact that subtitles would not appear to play a distracting role may be due to the familiarity of Finnish audiences with subtitling as a mainstream form of AVT.

Dimensions of reception

As noted in the introduction, the reception of translated audiovisual content has an individual and a social dimension. At the individual level, which has received significantly more scholarly attention, reception studies have explored the responses and reactions of individual viewers when presented with (primarily) dubbed and subtitled programmes. The social dimension, on the other hand, pertains to the collective decisions through which each community favours one mode of AVT over others.

The limited access to resources and the difficulties involved in reaching large audiences have significantly constrained the type and scale of research that translation studies scholars interested in the social dimension of reception studies have been able to conduct so far. Thus, what de Linde and Kay (1999) label as ‘the survey methods’ have been carried out almost exclusively by government agencies, national TV channels, distributors and audiovisual market providers. Some examples could be the Audetel project on AD undertaken in the early 1990s (UK), the reports on subtitling quality and viewers’ opinions published on a regular basis by Ofcom (UK), or the studies on the dubbing and subtitling industry and on the use of subtitling in Europe, which the Media Consulting Group carried out for the European Commission (2007, 2011). Apart from the VTB4All Project (Romero-Fresco 2015), most studies in AVT reception draw on relatively small samples of participants and tend to focus on the expectations and preferences of specific groups.

The study of reception at a social level, however, focuses on the impact of translated products on society and social preferences, and hence falls under what Gambier (2006) labels as repercussions. This dimension of reception concerning national and regional preferences is bound to develop as an important area of research in the near future, thanks to the affordances of big data and the empowerment of audiences, who are making an ever-bigger use of participatory technologies to express their views on (translated) media content. There is emerging evidence that digital technologies and the changing habits of media consumption that digitization has brought about are blurring traditional distinctions between subtitling and dubbing countries. TV channels and audiovisual markets are exploring new translation modalities and audiences are becoming used to other options (Chaume 2013). The availability and cohabitation of different modalities is bound to alter the reception of translated content over time, as audiences can now decide, and even demand, how they want to watch it (Orrego-Carmona 2014).
What is next?

Research on the reception of AVT encompasses a wide range of translation modalities, both established and emerging ones. Against this backdrop, some of the areas of scholarly research where reception studies are likely to feature more prominently in the future can be summarized as follows:

- Although reception studies have so far focused overwhelmingly on subtitling, they are likely to widen their scope and explore the extent to which dubbing, voice-over, AD and other translation modalities are able to improve the comprehension of, engagement with or immersion in translated audiovisual content.
- Some of the variables underpinning reception studies (e.g. the size and composition of participant samples) will receive further consideration. Likewise, the interplay between participants’ ages and experience with specific AVT modalities could yield important advances in our understanding of how media content is received. Participants’ ages may influence their perceptions of certain types of translation; consequently, it is necessary to gauge the extent to which being raised in a traditionally dubbing or subtitling country, or living in said country for an extended period of time, moulds one’s expectations or influences one’s reception of translated content in different ways.
- Evidence gathered through methodological triangulation and various experiments suggests that participants’ stated (and hence, subjective) preferences are not necessarily consistent with those same viewers’ performance, as measured by researchers through different indicators. Studies will need to explore how this misalignment between preferences and behaviour affect engagement and enjoyment.
- Experiments on subtitling reception have tended to measure the participants’ use of subtitles by exposing them to audiovisual content whose original language is not known to them. Real viewers, however, often have some knowledge of the foreign language(s) they are presented with. Even if they do not, it is safe to assume that the original soundtrack influences their viewing experience. Indeed, viewers are always exposed to the paralinguistic aural input available in the original content and are simultaneously accessing this information while reading the subtitles. The interplay between the aural and the other media codes in translated products is another area that requires attention.
- As audiences become more responsive and willing to express their views through various social media platforms, big data might shed more light on the reception of translated content in the future. For instance, as shown by Orrego-Carmona (2014), tweets could provide valuable information for scholars seeking to map audience preferences and reactions.
- In order to study how subtitles are actually read, AVT scholars often have to resort to labour-intensive and time-consuming tools and resources. Neighbouring scholarly areas, such as machine learning and data mining, could make the analysis of data more manageable and would allow the exploration of larger data sets.

Summary

Reception studies stands out as a fast-growing area of research within AVT. Although most studies to date have focused on subtitling, other modalities of translation are beginning to
receive more attention as users gain more exposure to them. This chapter has delivered an overview of research methods used to study reception and a range of experiments that have been conducted within AVT studies. Traditionally, the most popular methods have been questionnaires and eye tracking, but interviews, focus groups and direct observation have also been used. As in most other areas of translation studies, methodological triangulation is bound to yield particularly sound findings.

In the case of interlingual subtitling, reception studies have been more concerned with empirically testing established professional standards; in less established AVT modalities, such as AD, reception studies have facilitated the development of guidelines and standards. A number of future research avenues for reception studies in the context of AVT are sketched in the final part of the chapter. Future studies could draw on translation sociology to assess the social impact of AVT, and adopt a cognitive perspective to become better acquainted with the cognitive effort involved in processing translated media content.

Further reading

Chmiel, A. and I. Mazur (2016) ‘Researching Preferences of Audio Description Users—Limitations and Solutions’, Across Languages and Cultures 17(2): 271–288 | This paper offers a comprehensive account of previous research on the reception of AD, suggests ways of overcoming its limitations, and explores avenues for future research in the field.


Related topics

3 Subtitling on the cusp of its futures
6 Subtitling for deaf and hard of hearing audiences: moving forward
22 Eye tracking in audiovisual translation research
31 Accessible filmmaking: translation and accessibility from production
32 Technologization of audiovisual translation

References


AVT and audience reception


David Orrego-Carmona


