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Audiovisual translation and activism

Mona Baker

Introduction

Activism and activist are emotive and ill-defined terms. They are claimed by any party wishing to project itself as a courageous, independent voice that speaks out against what it narrates as injustices, and in so doing place itself and its supporters at varying degrees of risk. The Zionist Organization of America, for instance, boasts that it is ‘Always on the front lines of pro-Israel activism’ (Zionist Organization of America, n.d.), just as the many groups opposed to Israel and documented on the Palestine Freedom Project website (Palestine Freedom Project, n.d.) refer to themselves and are referred to by others as activists. The terms themselves, according to Tymoczko (2010: 12), have only been in circulation since the middle of the twentieth century, and were initially associated with high profile initiatives that involve direct political action, such as the feminist demonstrations and anti-war rallies of the 1960s and 1970s.

Despite its inherent slipperiness, both activists and scholars tend to associate the concept with anti-establishment initiatives, and often with specific issues that exceed national and social boundaries, including the environment, campaigning for gay rights, and putting an end to injustices such as child abuse and torture (Martin 2007, Courington 1999, Permanent Culture Now n.d.). Today, activism is no longer understood to be restricted to the political field, nor to highly visible forms of protest. Nevertheless, in its many denominations—including social activism, cultural activism, art activism and aesthetic activism—the term tends to imply that whatever initiative activists engage in at least has the potential to challenge or undermine some aspect of the political establishment and/or the corporate culture that upholds it. Referring to cultural activism, Buser and Arthurs (2013: 2) suggest that whatever its focus, an activist intervention must ‘challenge dominant interpretations and constructions of the world while presenting alternative socio-political and spatial imaginaries’. This assertion echoes a widely held assumption that an activist is essentially someone who poses a challenge to the mainstream values of the political, economic, cultural or social elite.

The increasingly global outlook of many activist movements today has placed audiovisual translation at the centre of all types of projects that work against the mainstream, especially those that involve political or aesthetic forms of intervention. The most common
mode in this evolving context is subtitling, given the relative ease and speed with which subtitles can be added to an audiovisual product, and advances in technology that allow videos posted on the Internet to be simultaneously subtitled into different languages by activists located in different parts of the world. Unlike dubbing and voice-over, subtitling also has the advantage of requiring very little capital and resources, and of being impersonal. The latter is important in the context of high-risk activism, where the possibility of identifying voices in dubbed and voice-over products could have serious consequences for the individuals concerned.

Activism in translation studies

Translation scholars have been slow to address the phenomenon of activism, despite relatively early attempts by Tymoczko (2000) to reflect on the topic, and later to bring attention to it through a special issue of The Massachusetts Review titled Translation and Activism (Tymoczko 2006). The first international forum organized to debate the topic was held a year later, at the University of Granada, under the title ‘Translation, Interpreting and Social Activism’ (Translation and Activism, n.d.) and resulted in a collected volume published in the same year, under the same title (Boéri and Maier 2007). By 2008, scholars such as Guo (2008) were beginning to ask: ‘what does the term “activism” refer to in translation studies?’ and ‘how can scholars conceptualize translators’ activist practices?’. At the same time, David Katan revealed a persistent unease with and confusion over the issue among translation scholars when he argued in his introduction to the inaugural issue of Cultus that one of the contributors ‘reclaims the translator’s “activist” role in terms of what she sees as essential in improving quality: empirical/descriptive translation research and training which focuses on professional output’ (2008: 9). Such uses of the term activist and activism arguably divest them of all meaning. Involvement in activist work is generally understood to come at a price, and while some translators and translation scholars may find the costs associated with activist work too high, the answer cannot be to either dismiss this vital dimension of translation or confuse it with important but non-activist work, and in so doing imply that what translators and translation scholars do has to be ‘more activist than it is . . . in order to be considered worthwhile at all’ (Tymoczko 2007: 216). Apart from the costs associated with activism, be they physical or emotional, the inherently partisan nature of activist work is clearly at odds with the traditional discourse of neutrality that pervaded both the profession and the discipline until recently, and may have been a further factor in dissuading many translation scholars from engaging with the issue.

Boéri (2008: 22) offers a robust critique of slippery and restrictive uses of activist and associated terms in translation studies, with particular reference to the field of interpreting, specifically the work of the volunteer interpreting collective Babels. Her critique raises three important issues: the tendency of the rhetoric deployed in some of the literature to ‘outstrip the actual power of social change that it assumes professional translators have at their disposal’; the exclusive focus on textual interventions and failure to address ‘the broader role of the translator or interpreter as a social and political actor’; and the tendency ‘to view the individual translator as the single motor of change, thus downplaying the collective dimension of both translation and activism’. While not denying the value of textual interventions or the contributions of individual activists, this critique—which addresses similar issues to those raised in Tymoczko (2000)—alerts us to important dimensions of activist work in translation that have traditionally been neglected in the discipline and are equally relevant in the context of audiovisual translation, as discussed later in this chapter.
Activism can assume different forms and involve divergent and opposing choices. While
many might consider the task of translation to be fundamentally one of enabling commu-
nication and dialogue, others have argued that an activist stance can also ‘involve blocking
communication and refusing to transmit cultural information’ (Tymoczko 2010: 230).
Nornes (2007: 184) offers the example of Robert Gardner, who excluded subtitles from
his ethnographic film *Forest of Bliss* (1986) in order to challenge the prevailing context
of reception in which ‘the ethnographic documentary renders other cultures transparent to
a scientific gaze’ and effect a new kind of relationship between spectators and the film’s
subjects. Alternatively, as Tymoczko argues, ‘sometimes the fact of translation itself . . . is
the primary activist achievement’ (2010: 229), especially in the context of censorship and
repression. The work of the activist collective Translate for Justice (Translate for Justice,
n.d.), recipient of the Elif Ertan New Voices in Translation Prize by the Translation and
Interpreting Association of Turkey (2015) and the Hermann Kesten Incentive Award by the
German PEN Centre (2016), is a good example. The collective has been extremely active
since the 2013 Gezi protests in making suppressed news and documentation about violations
of human rights in Turkey available at a global level.

Textual choices may also vary, and no specific textual strategy may be said to be activist
per se, as extensively demonstrated by critics of Lawrence Venuti’s influential work on for-
others). This issue is especially relevant in the context of audiovisual translation, where
the related concept of abusive subtitling has not received the same level of critical attention.

**Activism in audiovisual translation**

Pérez-González (2014: 58) suggests that ‘audiovisual translation, formerly a site of rep-
resentational practice, is quickly becoming a site of interventionist practice’. Not all
interventionist practices can be considered activist, however. Activism, as already explained,
is understood to involve a degree of risk and to pose some form of challenge to mainstream
values and the established social and political order. Hence, the type of interventions prac-
tised by the Guojiang Subtitle Group and discussed in Guo (2016) are arguably not activist.
These included replacing ‘China’ with ‘other countries’ in the Chinese subtitles of Senator
Rand Paul’s critical remarks on Donald Trump: ‘Trump says we ought to close that Internet
thing. The question really is, what does he mean by that? Like they do in North Korea?
Like they do in China?’. Such interventions reinforce the mainstream nationalist vision, and
rather than incur risks are designed to ensure that the subtitlers avoid pressure and come to
no emotional or physical harm.

In line with wider discussions of activism in the literature on fandom, Pérez-González’s
distinction between aesthetic and political activism (2014: 70) acknowledges the ‘increasing
similarities between fan cultures and contemporary mobilizations’ (Brough and Shresthova
2012). The work of fansubbers and fandubbers poses two types of challenge to the estab-
lished order. First, like other types of fan translation, ‘it questions the current operation of
global cultural industries by providing a new model of content distribution and its organiza-
tion based on consumers’ voluntary work’ (Lee 2011: 1132). And second, it challenges the
established global order by encouraging subtitlers to experiment with and develop innovative
subtitling strategies that undermine restrictive conventions imposed by the industry (Pérez-
González 2013: 10). Like the political subtitling initiatives discussed in Pérez-González
(2010, 2014, 2016), Baker (2016), Mortada (2016) and Selim (2016), this form of aesthetic
activism thus has the potential to undermine the prevailing world order, both corporate and
political, given the overlap and interdependence of the two systems. Nevertheless, it is also important to note that fan projects in general, including those that involve audiovisual translation, are not inherently activist, that they can be simultaneously resistant and complicit, and that like other activist initiatives they are vulnerable to the same processes of co-optation that pervade all areas of political and social life. Their political significance, however, ultimately lies in their ability to reconfigure relations of power, at least temporarily, through the participatory culture they nurture (Brough and Shresthova 2012).

The nature and contexts of activist interventions in audiovisual translation are yet to be explored in sufficient detail, as are the distinctive restrictions and opportunities imposed on or afforded to activists in various venues and with different genres within this domain. For example, Boeri’s (2008) concern over the literature’s undue focus on the individual translator as the locus of activist intervention is less relevant to the subtitling of commercial audiovisual products disseminated through official channels. These are inherently collective and tightly controlled enterprises where, unlike literary translation, the names of subtitlers tend not to be declared, and which have therefore not been discussed in the literature from the perspective of activism or the individual agenda of a subtitler. At the same time, recent developments in technology mean that an individual activist such as Zorbec le Gras, who subtitled into English a largely unreported anti-austerity speech by French MEP Daniel Cohn-Bendit in May 2010 and disseminated it among some two million YouTube users (Pérez-González 2014: 59), can conceive, initiate and carry out an activist subtitling project largely on his own. The same is true of Sony Islam, whose work is used by Pérez-González as a leitmotif in discussing self-mediation in audiovisual translation. In the context of audiovisual translation then, such individual activist initiatives now merit closer scholarly attention to offset the almost exclusive focus on collective interventions, not only in the much researched area of fansubbing, but also in the political domain (Baker 2016, Mortada 2016, Pérez-González 2010, 2016, Selim 2016). Similarly, while activist interventions that take the form of manipulating or displacing text types and genres (Tymoczko 2010: 230) have received some attention in the wider discipline, this dimension of activism remains totally neglected by audiovisual translation scholars. Even Pérez-González’s discussion of self-mediation, remediation and bricolage (2014: Chapter 7), which features several activist subtitling projects that involve generic shifts, does not explore the texts or initiatives analyzed from this perspective. The same is true of Baker’s brief analysis of a subtitled political commercial and some of the parodies it elicited on the Internet (2014: 171–173), where the implications of the generic shift from political commercial to ludic parody are not addressed.

To date, the only sustained examination of subtitling in the context of political activism is Baker (2016). This study highlights other themes in the wider discussion of political activism in translation studies that merit closer scrutiny in the context of audiovisual translation, including the visibility of individual activists and the level of agency they exercise within an activist initiative. Tymoczko (2007: 213) argues that ‘[e]ngaged translators are visible as subjects’ and that ‘[p]olitical effectiveness is most likely if there is a group of visible translators with a common project or program’. Baker’s study suggests otherwise, but also points to a more complex picture that requires a sustained research programme to unpack.

First, subtitlers working with activist collectives in the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, the context of Baker’s study, seemed to lack visibility, and indeed not to be keen on even reflecting on the issue when it was raised in interviews. Unlike the film makers and other activists involved in the collectives examined (Mosireen and Words of Women from the Egyptian Revolution), they were never mentioned or quoted in national or international media, and did
not give talks about the collectives at different venues. This meant that they were initially difficult to identify and could only be traced, for the purposes of arranging interviews, through the more visible film makers, journalists, urban planners and other activists connected with each collective. Their eschewing of visibility may be partly explained by entrenched attitudes to translation—including subtitling—as a secondary and derivative activity, but also by the contemporary culture of collaborative and collective activist work, where those involved are rarely interested in being credited as individuals. Mosireen videos acknowledge only collectives in the final credits, specifically Mosireen itself and occasionally another collective with which Mosireen collaborated in the production of a specific video. Film maker Philip Rizk explained in an unpublished interview with Baker that ‘there was never any consideration . . . of any references made to individuals’, including film makers, because ‘Mosireen is . . . not a group that’s celebrating authorship’ (18 January 2014 [32:15, 38:20]). But for film makers, this eschewing of individual visibility did not extend to speaking about the collective to the media and in public venues, as it did in the case of the subtitlers. More importantly, the subtitlers were not only invisible to the outside world, but were also largely invisible within the collective itself. Philip Rizk acknowledged in the same interview that ‘the most invisible participants are probably the translating team’ [27: 20], and that most members of the collective did not know ‘who the people are who are translating’ nor ‘why they’re translating’ [29: 50]. Another Mosireen film maker, Salma El-Tarzi, confirms that she had ‘no idea’ who translated the films she shot and edited for the collective, nor ‘their names’, nor ‘what they look like’ (2016: 90).

In terms of agency, and despite the vital work they undertook under intense pressure during a momentous period of history, the subtitlers interviewed tended to assume a largely passive role and ‘[di]d not seem to think of themselves as an organic part of either collective, nor to be regarded as such by the film-makers’ (Baker 2016: 16). Even the coordinator of the subtitling list of the larger of the two collectives, who had a long history of high-risk activism with other members of Mosireen, seemed to assume a largely subservient role in terms of subtitling, quite atypical of her character outside that context: ‘I see myself, and I think a lot of people [i.e. subtitlers on the Mosireen list] see themselves as not being key people but just serving and supporting and doing what we can’ (quoted in Baker 2016: 17). This choice of positioning within the larger collective has implications for the level of agency the subtitlers were willing to exercise. On the whole, subtitlers in both collectives were largely reluctant to intervene or make suggestions that could enhance the political message or even the legibility of the subtitles. None of them attempted, for instance, to alert film makers to the difficulty caused by placing background information in Arabic in the only space available for subtitling, at the bottom of the screen (Baker 2016: 16). In terms of subtitling strategies, examples of creative interventions that enhanced the political message turned out to have been introduced by the film makers, not the subtitlers (Baker 2016: 15). Perhaps, as Tymoczko asserts (2007: 216), ‘radical manipulation of texts and . . . subordination of text to ideology . . . are inimical to translators whose primary orientation is to the integrity of texts themselves’. And yet, we know that in the field of audiovisual translation fansubbing has broken this taboo, and hence we might reasonably expect an even greater level of intervention from politically motivated subtitlers.

Beyond the question of visibility, the tendency to shy away from textual intervention, noted by Tymoczko, is not confined to the audiovisual field, nor to ad hoc groups of translators who do not have the time or luxury to reflect critically on their position within larger formations because of the high-risk nature of their activism. The broad distinction proposed by Guo (2008: 11) between activists who translate and activist translators may shed some
light on this issue. Although activist groups dedicated to translation and interpreting, like Babels and Tlaxcala, make no distinction between professionals and non-professionals, and focus instead on a potential member’s commitment to the political principles that inform the project (Boéri 2008: 32), they do define themselves as *translators* or *interpreters* and hence position themselves explicitly within the professional and scholarly world of translation (Baker 2013: 26). In this respect they differ from fansubbing groups and members of activist collectives who do not identify as translators, such as the *Cuaderno de Campo* bloggers who subtitled George Galloway’s 2006 interview into Spanish (Pérez-González 2014: 63–65). Positioning themselves specifically as translators seems to discourage activists from adopting bold interventionist strategies at the textual level, and at best confines their experimentation to the spaces around events and texts. Babels’ foundational texts make reference to ‘experimentation in linguistic activism’, suggesting that the group does not view such interventions negatively. And yet, despite insisting that the group is a political actor rather than service provider for the Social Forum, Boéri confirms that ‘there is no evidence to suggest that volunteers are expected or encouraged to intervene in the narratives they mediate once they are in the booth’ (2008: 33).

Researching political activism in the audiovisual domain poses theoretical and methodological challenges that have not been discussed in the wider discipline. The most important of these are the loosely structured nature of the collectives that produce subtitled videos, and the fluidity of the data. Both are characteristic of contemporary social and political movements, which tend to be non-hierarchical, highly collaborative, and generally uninterested in exercising control over their output or maintaining a record of individual contributions to it. In the context of the Egyptian Revolution, while Mosireen did have a list of individuals whose task was to subtitle the videos shot by film makers, some of the film makers were also involved in subtitling some videos, especially those they considered particularly challenging, for instance because they featured stretches of poetry. Many of the film makers also revised videos after they had been uploaded to the collective’s YouTube channel, without leaving a trace of what was revised, when, and by whom. At the same time, there was no attempt to control or document the subtitling of a collective’s videos into languages not covered by the subtitling team. Co-founder of Words of Women from the Egyptian Revolution, Leil-Zahra Mortada, explained one pattern that reveals the fluidity and proliferation of subtitled versions on the Internet: ‘I [typically] got a notification [from Amara/Universal Subtitles] that this person translated your video into whatever, Malaysian or Urdu or whatever. I didn’t even upload it to YouTube’ (unpublished interview by Baker, 27 February 2014 [44:50]). This level of fluidity and the absence of any trace of individual contributions and revisions have two implications for researchers interested in studying political activism in the context of audiovisual translation. First, textual and visual data, typically accessible through the Internet, need to be contextualized and supplemented by other sources, such as interviews and participant observation. Second, scholars need to formulate meaningful research questions that recognize the nature of the data and the movements that produce it, rather than attempt to address traditional questions that assume a stable, fixed and well documented set of outputs and discrete roles for those involved in producing them.

Finally, the few studies that have examined audiovisual translation collectives so far suggest that both aesthetic and political activism in this domain have been relatively modest in terms of scale, level of political awareness and impact on the profession and discipline. Whereas Boéri claims that ‘Babels has inaugurated what we might call a “geopolitical turn” in conference interpreting’ (2008: 23), and there is evidence to suggest that it has indeed
shifted the debate in both profession and discipline (Baker 2018), nothing of this scale or theoretical sophistication has yet been witnessed in the area of audiovisual translation, especially where political activism is concerned. Fansubbing communities can be very large in size, and their work has had an acknowledged impact on the industry (Nornes 2007, Pérez-González 2014, among others) and attracted critical attention from a number of disciplines such as law and media studies (Leonard 2005, Lee 2011), but they have not shifted the debate in audiovisual translation scholarship in a similar way. Political activism in the audiovisual translation sphere, on the other hand, seems to be largely confined to work done by ‘individuals working under their own steam’ (Pérez-González 2014: 242) rather than collectives of the scale and complexity of Babels. And while fansubbing communities tend to be fairly stable networks with a relatively long-term agenda, most initiatives involving political activism are now carried out by what Pérez-González refers to as ‘ad-hocracies’ of amateur subtitlers: temporary constellations that come together to address a specific challenge and then disperse (2010, 2014: 243).

Activist textual strategies in audiovisual translation

Most discussions of activist textual strategies in the literature focus on subtitling, rather than other modes of audiovisual translation. Fansubbers as well as political activists have introduced a range of strategies that flout mainstream conventions, such as varying the size and colour of fonts, placing subtitles in different positions on the screen, adding non-diegetic subtitles to explain a pun or express sarcasm (Pérez-González 2014: 255–256), and replacing the original set of subtitles released with a film or video with another set that undercuts the original message or exploits the visuals to communicate a new one in a different context (Baker 2014: 171–173, Pérez-González 2014: 236–239). These strategies enhance the visibility of the mediator and the process of mediation, and some are adopted specifically to increase awareness of the foreign culture and encourage the viewer to engage with it on its own terms. Dwyer (2012: 229) suggests that the latter is the main goal of fansubbers, who are keen to challenge what she refers to, following Leonard (2005), as the “culturally “deodorizing” function” of the industry.

To what extent these effects and the strategies intended to produce them serve activist goals depends on the context in which an audiovisual product is released and the nature of the fictional or non-fictional worlds mediated by the subtitles. More importantly, activist subtitlers may vary their strategies within the same audiovisual product, depending on the political goals they set out to pursue. Baker (2007/2010: 165–167, 126–128) demonstrates this with reference to the varying lexical choices adopted in subtitling shaheed into English in a Palestinian documentary about Israeli attacks on the Jenin refugee camp in 2002. Nornes (2007: 184–185) offers a more complex example of his own ‘abusive translation’ of a documentary by Sato Makoto about the impact on old people of mercury poisoning caused by the release of untreated toxic compounds into the Agano River basin. To encourage the English-speaking spectator to engage with aspects of the protagonists’ humanity that even domestic viewers cannot appreciate through the rural and largely inaccessible dialect used by the people of Nigata, Nornes ‘attempted to replicate the experience of an urban Japanese spectator by using sentence fragments, single words’ and by adding his own comments in brackets as well as a subtitler’s preface to explain the context and prepare the viewer ‘to expect something strange and to read the subtitles with an open mind’. At the same time, ‘[w]here utterances were highly legible, the subtitles were no different than in any other film’ (2007: 185).
Experimentation and creativity: abusive subtitling and vs prefiguration

Nornes defines abusive subtitling as a practice that ‘does not feign completeness’ and ‘does not hide its presence through restrictive rules’ (1999: 28, 2007: 176). The abusive subtitler engages in ‘experimentation with language . . . to bring the fact of translation from its position of obscurity’ and to critique the ‘imperial politics’ that inform conventional industry practices, with a view to ‘ultimately leading the viewer to the foreign original’ (1999: 18, 2007: 176–177). Experimentation and creativity do not necessarily lead to an appreciation of the foreign, however, as O’Sullivan notes in her discussion of innovative subtitles in Night Watch (2004) and Slumdog Millionaire (2008), which ‘serve to create an immersive experience for the target audience rather than to draw the viewers’ attention to the foreignness of the film text’ (2011: 152). Experimentation can also serve different activist goals, some of which have little to do with foregrounding the foreign or the fact of translation per se.

In the context of global movements of collective action, the question of foregrounding the foreign as such is of little interest. Indeed, commitment to solidarity—a key concept in contemporary political and social movements—calls for adopting practices that actively break down the binaries of foreign vs domestic and that place emphasis instead on actualizing values and principles which transcend individual cultures and partake of a global idiom of resistance (Baker 2016). As Pérez-González also notes, audiovisual translation is now a central element of the push to break down barriers in the media marketplace, where ‘collaborative technologies are contributing to the formation of transnational networked collectivities, and hence re-defining the traditional boundaries of nation-based cultural and linguistic constituencies’, ultimately raising awareness of the fluidity and complexity of cultural and national identities (2014: 61). In this context, activist subtitling cannot be defined purely in terms of foregrounding the foreign or the fact of translation as such, and scholars therefore need to explore concepts other than ‘abusive subtitling’ to make sense of emerging patterns of activist engagement with audiovisual products. Nornes predicted this as early as 1999, when he argued that what was once radical textual and visual experimentation was already becoming mainstream, and suggested that ‘when abusive subtitling becomes normalized’ scholars should ‘think of other terms’ (1999: 32, 2007: 187) that can offer more relevant insight into means and motives for breaking conventions in audiovisual translation.

Focusing on activist subtitling in the context of contemporary political movements, Baker (2016) borrows the concept of prefiguration from social movement studies, especially the work of Maecelbergh (2009, 2011). Like abusive subtitling, where the main thrust of abuse ‘is directed at convention’ (Nornes 1999: 32), prefiguration privileges experimentation and involves challenging established patterns of practice. However, rather than foregrounding the foreign, the emphasis in prefigurative politics is on putting into practice the values and principles to which activists subscribe, and in so doing bringing the world they aspire to create into existence. The principles to be put into practice include a commitment to solidarity, diversity, non-hierarchy, horizontality and non-representational modes of practice. Activist film making and subtitling seek to actualize these principles rather than foreground the foreign or the fact of translation as such. The strategies used may appear similar on the surface, but the goals are different, to varying degrees and in different contexts. For instance, the collective Words of Women from the Egyptian Revolution deliberately reduced cutaway images ‘to the bare minimum’, opting to reveal cuts even though they ‘could be perceived as “mistakes”’, in order to be transparent about the unavoidable act of representation involved in shooting and editing any filmic product, rather than obscure it and lull the viewer into the
illusion of a direct, unmediated experience of the women’s voices (Mortada 2016: 132). This overlaps with the idea of bringing the fact of translation and mediation in general into light, but is informed by a subtly different political principle—rejection of representational practices—and is not restricted to translation. The same principle informs Philip Rizk’s assertion that he is committed to resisting the act of representation even as he recognizes that he has to engage in it by speaking to the media about the Egyptian Revolution: ‘I don’t claim to be able to speak on behalf of a collective that is not uniform. The best I can do is . . . to spend time with the people that make up this revolution, to listen, to learn and speak in humility. In this act of speaking I do not attempt to “represent,” I try to interpret, but representation is out of the question’ (Rizk 2013). Well-educated activists like Rizk do not seek visibility as mediators: visibility is thrust on them by the dynamics of media practices and the unequal distribution of power. They accept it reluctantly and use it to give voice to others they know they cannot claim to ‘represent’.

Another political principle, commitment to diversity, informs the strategy adopted by Words of Women in subtitling its interviews from Arabic into Spanish (Mortada 2016, Baker 2016). Mortada explains that it was important for the group to develop a gender-sensitive strategy that embraced ‘people who do not identify as men or women, who adopt a queer politics’ (2016: 134). This meant that rather than settle for the familiar activist strategy of replacing the masculine o and feminine a with @, which could be interpreted as a visual combination of both, the team opted to replace the gender marker with x, as in amigx and deteniéndolxs. This choice, Mortada explains, ‘was felt to subvert the gender binary in the language’ (2016: 134), to signal the collective’s rejection of gender as a category that suppresses the diversity of human beings by forcing them into mutually exclusive choices within a rigid classificatory system. It is not a choice that aims to foreground the foreignness or otherwise of the women featured, nor specifically the mediator or act of mediation. As Baker notes, however, this innovative strategy which recognizes the space of subtitling as a medium of intervention turned out to be initiated by the film makers, not the subtitlers (2016: 15).

The pressures of a violent, revolutionary context impose certain constraints on activists’ ability to adopt innovative practices that reflect their political principles. While a commitment to experimentation and breaking conventions is inherent in the logic of prefigurative politics (Yates 2015), as it is in abusive subtitling, this principle may be jettisoned for ethical reasons. Omar Robert Hamilton, a member of Mosireen interviewed by Baker, reflects on this issue from a film maker’s perspective: ‘you’ve got some father or mother crying over their kid who’s been killed and they’re saying how they’re going to get their rights, and it’s not the place for you to come in and video art and mess around . . . it’s not your job to come in and make an Omar Hamilton film of their grief’ (unpublished interview, 26 April 2014 [22:50]). What may appear in some activist work, including activist translation, as a tendency to shy away from experimentation and creativity may therefore have complex explanations.

Other constraints on adopting prefigurative practices are a facet of the inevitable tension between politics and logistics, and between different sets of political values. No activist initiative, within or outside the context of audiovisual translation, can achieve total coherence between political goals and actual practices (Yates 2015: 17), even in peaceful times. These difficulties are exacerbated during periods of turmoil and in the context of high-risk activism, and inevitably impact subtitling practices. Activist translation and interpreting initiatives like Tlaxcala and Babels, which are conceived and undertaken in stable, low-risk contexts, innovatively prefigure their commitment to linguistic and cultural diversity, solidarity and non-hierarchy by ensuring that they provide translations into and from languages...
such as Catalan, Greek, Hungarian, Persian, Tamazight and Turkish, in addition to the dominant English, French, German and Spanish, and by experimenting with layout and the ordering of languages on their website (Baker 2013). Mosireen and Words of Women from the Egyptian Revolution paid little attention to the prefigurative implications of their choice of subtitling languages, however. They typically put out calls on social media for volunteer subtitlers into English and Spanish, occasionally French and German, and circulated the odd call for subtitlers working into close regional languages such as Greek and Turkish. This practice undercuts the principle of solidarity because it does not support building South-South networks of communication and fails to recognize that ‘solidarity is most desperately needed among activists located in areas of the world where the system of oppression is at its most brutal’ (Baker 2016: 10). An attempt to engage subtitlers who can work into Kashmiri, Hindi, Kurdish and similar languages through calls on social media and other outlets could have proved rewarding, but the emotional and physical difficulty of documenting and disseminating information about harrowing events at great speed understandably left activists little time and energy for reflection and planning.

Another subtitling practice that undercut the collectives’ commitment to prefiguration in the context of the Egyptian Revolution involved using English as a basis for subtitles into all other languages, rather than attempting to find volunteers who can subtitle directly from Arabic. This pattern replicated the practices of corporate media and the film industry and hence reproduced the structures of power that members of each collective are committed to challenging under normal circumstances. They also inadvertently allowed ‘a colonial language that is deeply implicated in the processes of subjugation and misrepresentation’ they were risking their lives to expose ‘to function as a filter for values expressed by the diverse characters depicted in the videos’ (Baker 2016: 10). This contrasts sharply with practices adopted by activist translators such as those involved in Tlaxcala, whose manifesto (Tlaxcala, n.d.) reveals awareness of the politics of language and their responsibility in ‘de-imperializing’ English and other dominant languages, disrupting linguistic hierarchies, and fostering networks of solidarity outside the North-South divide.

Despite the inevitable tensions and unavoidable compromises, prefigurative strategies in the context of revolutions and protests must ultimately aspire to enhance rather than undercut the political principles that inform contemporary global activism. Translational choices have to adapt the commitment to experimentation to the exigencies of the revolutionary moment, but should ideally be reflexive and demonstrate awareness of the political stakes involved. Some of the examples discussed in Baker (2016), such as lack of attention to code-switching and register variation in videos subtitled into Spanish and English, have the cumulative effect of streamlining the individual voices of speakers ‘into the homogeneous voice of an articulate, educated representative of the Egyptian Revolution’, and in so doing undercutting the commitment to diversity evident in the film-makers’ decision to film a wide range of speakers and Mosireen’s explicit invitation to subtitlers not to be afraid of ‘street language’ (2016: 13). Apart from the time constraints—specifically the need to get subtitled videos circulated on the Internet very quickly as events unfolded on the ground—and the emotional pressure involved, subtitlers’ reluctance to break conventions and make bold decisions may be explained by the way they position themselves and are positioned within activist collectives, as already explained. This issue needs to be aired and debated within the discipline and among volunteer groups in order to ensure that audiovisual translation plays a positive role in supporting global networks of solidarity in future (Baker 2016: 18).
The impact of technology

Much has been written about the empowering impact of recent advances in technology in many areas of social and professional life, including translation. Pérez-González (2014: 233) suggests that audiovisual translation is experiencing a ‘demonic turn’, aided by the ‘democratization of access to digital technologies’ that have ended the monopoly exercised by the film and television industry. Advances in technology have indeed been instrumental in enabling the emergence of a vibrant, participatory culture that has benefited activist projects of both the political and aesthetic type. Platforms such as Amara provide tools that are ‘free and open source and make the work of subtitling and translating video simpler, more appealing, and, most of all, more collaborative’ (Amara website). Amara was used by the volunteer subtitlers and film makers of Mosireen and Words of Women.

While the empowering effect of such platforms is undeniable, it is also important to think critically about the political and aesthetic implications of increased reliance on them and an uncritical celebration of their liberatory potential. Amara is not as ‘non-profit’ and independent of the corporate world as it claims to be. Munday (2012: 332, fn 3) confirms that Amara (formerly Universal Subtitles), launched in 2010, had already received one million dollars in seed funding from Mozilla ‘and was opening up to corporate clients’ by 2012. Today, the Amara website features an entire section of ‘Enterprise Solutions’ that offers a variety of for-profit services for crowdsourcing and on-demand subtitling (Amara on Demand, n.d.). Many, though by no means all, contemporary activist initiatives strive to remain independent of the corporate world and its logic; they tend to use crowdfunding instead of corporate funding to support their work, and do not engage in for-profit activities. As Lievrouw explains, new social movements also favour small-scale projects and a micromedia, ‘DIY aesthetic’ that reflects their suspicion of ‘supersized modern culture’ (2011: 61). While this position may seem unrealistic to many, it is sensitive to the processes of appropriation evident in the history of many initiatives that straddle the activist and corporate worlds. One of the dangers posed by such mixed initiatives is that they perpetuate a pattern of dependency that gradually gives rise to an ‘industry’ of participatory and activist culture, one that quickly falls under the control of the monopolies of financial capitalism.

A related issue is that technology imposes its own restrictions on activists, some of which undercut their political and aesthetic agendas and block the commitment to experimentation emphasized in the literature on both abusive subtitling and prefiguration. And just as it opens up new spaces and opportunities for intervention by unaffiliated citizens, it creates the conditions for monopolies to emerge and control the form in which dissent may be expressed, as well as the parameters of innovation it can exercise. Attempts to experiment with the number and placement of subtitles in a Mosireen video entitled ‘The Revolutionaries’ Response to the Tahrir Monument’ (Mosireen 2013) in November 2013 did not succeed, because YouTube compatible files have to be in .srt format, which does not support placing more than one subtitle per screenshot, or anywhere other than in the centre, at the bottom of the screen. Mosireen film maker Omar Robert Hamilton acknowledged that ‘one’s aesthetic sensibilities have to be put aside when it comes to using YouTube’ (unpublished interview by Baker, 26 April 2014 [46:50]). Despite this, and the fact that YouTube places advertisements at the beginning of each video, some of which may be completely at odds with the political message being communicated, activist film makers and subtitlers have to accept it as ‘a utilitarian space’ [47.00] because ‘there isn’t anything close to another option’ [48:30]. The most obvious alternative, Vimeo, does not have the same
functionalities YouTube offers, including the ability to display soft subs and a means of selecting from a range of languages, and does not enjoy the same reach. Vimeo’s restricted reach makes it of limited use in nurturing networks of solidarity across different national and subcultural communities.

In an ideal world, the tension between the logistics of any activist project and its political goals should be resolved in favour of politics, which means that logistical decisions should embody a commitment to autonomy from market relations and the profit-driven culture activists seek to challenge. In the real world, however, the best that activists can do in many cases is to reflect critically on how they position themselves within this tension rather than simply celebrate the emancipatory potential of the technology they opt to use at any moment. This is a theme that needs to be taken up in future research on activism in audiovisual translation, given the current tendency to celebrate the power of technology uncritically in both profession and discipline.

Summary

Recent technological advances and the increasingly global outlook of many activist movements today have placed audiovisual translation at the centre of various initiatives that seek to challenge the corporate and political order. This chapter has outlined a number of methodological challenges that complicate the study of activist audiovisual translation and called for a rethinking of research priorities and theoretical assumptions in this area of scholarship. The discussion has focused on political rather than aesthetic activism, and on subtitling as the most common mode of circulating activist audiovisual products on a global level. Issues discussed include the visibility and agency of subtitlers in political movements, activist textual strategies, abusive subtitling, prefiguration, the impact of technology, and the tension between politics and logistics. The arguments have been largely supported by examples from a study of subtitling during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, including material drawn from unpublished interviews conducted by the author.

Related topics

19 Gender in audiovisual translation: advocating for gender awareness
26 Audiovisual translation and popular music
27 Audiovisual translation and fandom

Further Reading

Baker, M. (2016) ‘The Prefigurative Politics of Translation in Place-based Movements of Protest: Subtitling in the Egyptian Revolution’, *The Translator* 22(1): 1–21 | Borrowing the concept of prefiguration from social movement studies, this study shows how activist film making and subtitling seek to actualize the principles of solidarity, diversity, non-hierarchy, horizontality and non-representational modes of practice, rather than foregrounding the foreign or the fact of translation as such.


Nornes, A. M. (1999) ‘For an Abusive Subtitling’, *Film Quarterly* 52(3): 17–34 | Nornes’ concept of ‘abusive subtitling’, that Baker uses in this paper to make sense of emerging patterns of
activist engagement with audiovisual products, was originally developed to account for fansubbing practices.


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**Filmography**

