

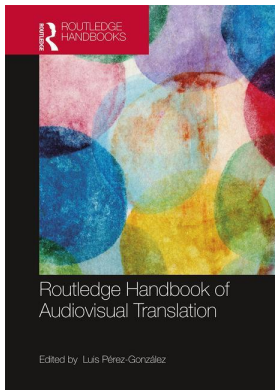
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Subtitling on the cusp of its futures

Marie-Noëlle Guillot

Introduction

Subtitling today is facing considerable opportunities and challenges, in practice and theory. This applies with particular acuteness to interlingual film subtitling, the written target language rendition(s) of source text speech in films that is the focus in this chapter (henceforth ‘film subtitling’ or ‘subtitling’ for short).

The practice itself is approaching its hundredth year. Subtitling as an academic discipline is young in research terms, barely twenty-five years old. It has been steadily firming up its foundations and developing its credentials as a research strand and area of professional specialization within the discipline of audiovisual translation (AVT). Since the mid-1990s, it has been busy identifying domains of concern, evolving methodologies, developing greater rigour in research, finding interdisciplinary partners to help it come to terms effectively with the multimodal nature of subtitling. In the midst of all that came the onset of fansubbing, and with it the ripple effect that has underpinned the explosion of amateur practices generally—subtitling by the people for the people. Together with its catalyst, the spectacular technological developments ongoing since then on a global scale, this explosion has radically changed what is at stake in subtitling. One of the most momentous changes for the practice since its inception may well turn out to be that technology has put it in the hands of the general public, literally at their fingertips, with the opportunity to shift from a passive role as viewers to active and activist roles as prosumers—producers and distributors of their own edited materials (Díaz Cintas 2013: 273, Pérez-González 2014). There is no aspect of subtitling, in practice or theory, that has not been and will not be affected by this phenomenon and its implications. Its long-term significance was heralded by a handful of scholars with early ‘insights into the butterfly effect of globalization on audiovisual translation’ (Pérez-González 2006 and above). The extent to which it would rock the foundations of subtitling even before they were fully established has only more recently begun to be more fully appreciated.

The aim of this chapter is to locate film subtitling at this crucial juncture between its recent past as a maturing practice and a young discipline, and the uncharted territories of its future, with the questions that it compels the field to revisit and the new ones that it raises.

Technological development is a main drive in the review of aspects and issues of subtitling in this perspective, as a platform to project in what lies ahead, but also to revisit the past and reassess its achievements, and its oversights. There are urgent themes to be addressed and re-addressed at this interface of past and future, and of professional and amateur practice in film subtitling. These include the creative specificities and potential of subtitling and subtitles; the question of quality in the sharing of the AVT sphere by professionals and amateurs; and the sociocultural aspects of film subtitling and linguistic and cultural impact in increasingly cross- and intercultural global contexts.

These themes are the canvas for the three sections in this chapter, entitled ‘Processes and evolutions, constraints and opportunities’, ‘Means and modes of meaning in subtitling’ and ‘Research and methodologies’.

Processes and evolutions, constraints and opportunities

Today a standard PC with subtitling software is all that is needed for subtitlers to complete a film subtitling project, and synthesize the processes involved in subtitling that before digitization were carried out separately, normally by several individuals, and with less flexibility, or reliability.

We are a long way away from subtitles’ post-silent films intertitles debuts, generally traced as subtitling’s historical platform (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007: 26, Pérez-González 2014: 35–43), and a long way from the timecoded VHS tapes of the 70s and 80s. The tasks involved were then laboriously sequential: transcribing and analyzing source dialogue lines, identifying their exact location, defining units of text to be subtitled, spotting (or cueing or time-coding), i.e. setting the times for subtitles to come in and out of frame and the duration of on-screen display (not too short, to avoid flashing effects, nor too long, to avoid viewers getting distracted), producing a spotting list synthesizing this information, with subtitle numbers for ease of reference and, at best, explanations about unusual words or phrases (e.g. idioms or colloquialisms) and culture-specific references, producing subtitles conforming to accepted guidelines, at least for mainstream subtitling, checking and editing. While the technical processes of transferring subtitles to films have evolved considerably since the early days, from mechanical and thermal subtitling to laser engraving and superimposition electronic techniques today (Ivarsson and Carroll 1998: 12–19, Díaz Cintas 2010a), these basic procedures have not to a great extent. What has changed, significantly, is that, thanks to increasingly sophisticated subtitling software applications readily available to professionals and non-professionals, some free on the Internet, these steps can be integrated and subtitles produced online, by almost anyone with a modicum of IT expertise. The sharing out of subtitling space between producers and consumers heralded in the 80s with the subtitling by fans of Japanese *anime*, then with cumbersome videotapes, now from readily shared digital files, is today almost unimpeded, technically speaking at least. And there is more on the technical horizon, with respeaking and voice recognition software (Romero-Fresco 2011) already extensively deployed in live intralingual subtitling for news or sports programmes in the UK, for example, and tested for interlingual practices in combination with computer assisted translation tools.

These developments are recapitulated in updates and syntheses by regular commentators in AVT (Díaz Cintas 2013, Gambier 2013, O’Hagan 2013, Pérez-González 2014, Taylor 2013, Yau 2014 in the past few years, for example; Chiaro 2009, Díaz Cintas 2010b, Gottlieb 1998, O’Connell 2007, Pérez-González 2009, Remael 2010 before then). Core definitions of subtitling have themselves changed little over the years, but show signs of mutation. They

are practically the same in Gambier's introduction to the 2003 landmark special issue of *The Translator* on screen translation, when technology's impact was beginning to get more broadly recognized, and in his account ten years later in another benchmark handbook, when it had become an integral feature in AVT:

moving from the oral dialogue to one/two written lines and from one language to another, sometimes to two other languages.

(2003: 172)

vs.

moving from oral dialogues in one or several languages to one or two written lines.

(2013: 50)

Change is signposted in Gambier's description of the processes involved, as carried out 'by the same person (translating and spotting) or by a translator and a technician spotting and timing the subtitles' (2003: 172) and, ten years later, 'more and more frequently . . . by the same person: translating, spotting (or cueing, time-coding) and editing, thanks to *ad hoc* software' (2013: 50).

Definitions are identical in Díaz Cintas and Remael's 2007 staple academic reference manual for subtitling, and Díaz Cintas in a later 2013 handbook entry. In both, subtitling is accounted for in greater detail as

a translation practice that consists of presenting a written text, generally on the lower part of the screen, that endeavours to recount the original dialogue of the speakers, as well as the discursive elements that appear in the image (letters, inserts, graffiti, inscriptions, placards and the like) and the information that is contained on the soundtrack (songs, voices off).

(2007: 8; 2013: 274)

There is a telling departure from these benchmark accounts in Pérez-González, also a leading subtitling scholar, from 2009 (*Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* entry) to 2014 (AVT monograph). In the 2009 entry, interlingual subtitles are said to

provide viewers with a written rendition of the source text speech, whether dialogue or narration, in their own language.

(2009: 14)

References to number of lines, explicit in Gambier, and spatial positioning at the bottom of the screen, identified as common in Remael and Díaz Cintas, are present in Pérez-González's 2009 entry. In his generic account of subtitling/subtitles, Pérez-González notes that 'subtitles composed according to widely accepted parameters contain a maximum of two lines of text'/'normally near the bottom of the frame' (2009: 15, 14), while acknowledging that other alternatives are possible. They are absent from the 2014 version:

snippets of written text superimposed on visual footage that convey a target language version of the source speech.

(2014: 15–16)

Spatial considerations and number of lines are discussed later in Pérez-González's volume, of course. The contrast with other definitions for subtitling is still significant. It is an index of the underlying tensions between practices imposed in mainstream subtitling and the film industry, with strict sets of guidelines and the 'accepted parameters' flagged above in Pérez-González, and their perversion by fans and amateur subtitling. It embodies the debates, in practice and in theory, that have pitted accessibility, a main longstanding theme in subtitling, against creativity, in its challenge of the diktats of medial constraints—objectivized in the industry and relativized outside of it. Are accessibility and creativity incompatible? This is a main debate for the twenty-first century.

With digitization, subtitling has become faster and cheaper, already a trademark of subtitling by comparison with dubbing. There are now added pressures: expectations of almost instant availability via a range of distribution channels and platforms, on mobile/hand-held devices or catch-up and on-demand television, with growing flexibility in viewing options: multiple language but also text fonts, size, colours. *A la carte* menus fully individualizing options are just round the corner, emulating and superseding types of subtitles that already make standard use of the interplay of different typographical resources (subtitles for use by the deaf and hearing impaired, for example, or 'closed' subtitles that are not part of the programme, unlike the 'open' subtitles of cinema, and can be turned on and off), and, imminently, of individual viewing devices in cinemas (e.g. subtitle glasses with titles projected on lenses). With greater control in one or fewer hands, textual reliability is also arguably easier to safeguard, with fewer opportunities for mishaps, like textual slips from editing decisions not involving translators commonly reported on in the literature for commercial subtitling. By the same token, there is greater scope for the layout and textual resourcefulness and boldness that has been a trademark of amateur subtitling.

Technically speaking, innovation is pushing the boundaries of the possible at a rate unimaginable just a few years ago—simplifying, automatizing, speeding up and diversifying processes and options, and has become one of the most extensively reported-on topics in syntheses of AVT and subtitling developments, including those just cited (Díaz Cintás 2013, Gambier 2013, also O'Hagan 2013, etc.). Basic technical and other challenges themselves have not gone away. But they are getting modulated, and acquiring a different spin with fresh reviews of longstanding assumptions, relating to interlingual subtitling's medial features.

Interlingual subtitling is characterized by the interplay of three distinct but interdependent components, routinely identified as baseline in definitions, as in the set above: source text speech, written text, visual footage. The interaction of the visual, the auditory, text and images has unique features and has been a main locus of attention for subtitling studies from their earliest days. Three types of phenomena are usually identified, all fundamental in their impact on the core activity for interlingual subtitling: representation through language, in cross-cultural mode.

Top of the list are the spatial and temporal factors that earned subtitling its label as 'constrained translation' in the early days (Titford 1982). Where subtitles should be positioned on the screen, how much space they should occupy, how long they should be displayed on screen so as not to impinge on viewing experience have been prime concerns for mainstream practices and guidelines, with their standard edicts. The number of characters per line is one (normally 36–40 maximum including spaces and punctuation), with also the number and positioning of lines (2 maximum at any one time, bottom of the screen). Others include temporal synchronicity with utterances, display time (one to six seconds maximum, no longer than is needed for subtitles to be read, but not so short that the text should flash and not register), with adaptations as required depending on languages (e.g. Japanese and vertical

display). Ivarsson and Carroll's (1998) code of subtitling practices is an early influential embodiment of recommendations to the profession, and a platform for subsequent streamlined versions (e.g. Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007).

Readability has been the main drive with unobtrusiveness, for these and other recommendations about text itself: fonts (usually sans serif types, white on dark background), but also punctuation conventions, like the use of ellipsis/triple dots to indicate that a subtitle is carried over the next subtitle/s, segmentation into syntactically and semantically self-contained units avoiding demanding lexical or other items (e.g. acronyms), etc.

Guidelines are underpinned by assumptions about various factors: audiences' reading speeds and strategies, their cognitive capacity to process fragmented text sequentially, since subtitles appear one after the other on their own, and to respond at the same time to non-verbal visual and aural signs, risks of perceptual disorientation in case of double takes or related mishaps, expectations. Capacities and expectations are highly variable, as variable as target audiences are diverse—socioculturally, in terms of age, status, education, viewing and processing habits, themselves in a state of flux as audiences get more adept at processing text on screen in semiotically complex contexts in the age of online multimedia. Empirical backup has been technically challenging to secure, and limited, with few dedicated experimental investigations initially, though see d'Ydewalle *et al.* 1987 and De Linde and Kay 1999, for example. It is now building up with studies harnessing cutting-edge technology to research (e.g. eye trackers, as elaborated below). These more recent studies look set to prompt reviews of the one-size-fits-all approaches ubiquitous in mainstream subtitling, but already challenged in fansubbing by unfettered practices putting paid to the normative and to the expectations it creates. Technology itself is making some of these practical limitations a thing of the past. Professional subtitling programmes now use pixels and have moved from mono- to non-monospaces fonts, for example, allowing for greater rationalization of space and flexibility in the numbers of characters used, particularly in Internet subtitling (Díaz Cintas 2013: 274–275). Digital manipulation of images and embedded text is likewise becoming commonplace.

A second routinely prominent concern with space and time is the shift from speech to writing, to which subtitling owes its categorization as a 'diasemiotic' or 'intermodal' form of translation (Gottlieb 1998). How can the aural in speech be expressed in writing, how can the expressive in voice quality, intonation, orality, accents and other sociocultural markers or paralinguistic features like pausing be conveyed in written mode? We normally speak faster than we read, so these conundrums are compounded by space and time limitations, notably in mainstream practice. Without the straitjacket of imposed standards, there has been, here too, scope for creative representation, including with techniques used in closed subtitles for viewers with no or limited access to sound, and capitalized on in amateur subtitling: variations in the use of colour, harnessed to speaker-coding in SDH, of typography and punctuation to convey aurally expressed shifts in tone and loudness, emotions (e.g. larger fonts for anger) (in static writing), as well as animated writing and in text or pop-up hypertext notes, etc. Speech in source dialogues is itself a far cry from naturally occurring speech, to which it is at times misguidedly assimilated: it is written-to-be-spoken, shaped by audience design and narrative efficiency, diegesis and the need to keep overhearing audiences in the loop. It is stylized in all respects, with pre-planned continuity, coherence and cohesion, artificially conveying speech naturalness and orality in what Chaume describes for dubbing as 'prefabricated orality' (2004). For subtitling the representational leap and suspension of linguistic disbelief is even greater. The inventiveness of amateur practices and viewers' responses are an index of our capacities to generate make-belief with text, and to

respond to it. They are a test for mainstream practices, but also an invitation to (re)appraise them by contrast in their stylized distinctiveness (see next section).

Multimodality is a third core aspect. Text in films does not work on its own. It is just one of their meaning-making resources, with other visual and aural modes: images, perspective, sounds and music, etc. Nor does it simply co-exist with other semiotic codes. They all mesh together in ways orchestrated by film directors and editors to ‘achieve coherence, intentionality, informativity, intertextuality, relevance and the maxims of conversation’ (Gambier 2013: 47), in narrative wholes that are greater than the sum of their parts. Modes and their submodes (e.g. typography, font, etc. for writing and the core mode of language) clarify, add, contradict or enhance one another (Taylor 2013, Pérez-González 2014). Their relationship impacts on what can or should be translated in subtitles, and how, in an additional layer of information that is also an integral part of the equation. By multiplying the signifying codes that can be harnessed to produce meaning in films or relied on in their interpretation, and by diversifying their uses, technology in this case has, if anything, made things even more complex for our understanding of the tension between creativity and accessibility.

A fourth significant but underrepresented aspect will be just flagged at this point. It relates to ‘cultural a-synchrony’ (Manhart 2000), i.e. source/target linguistic and cultural mismatches, always present, rarely addressed explicitly, and raises issues of linguistic and cultural representation and audience responses taken up in subsequent sections.

Digitization has not removed perennial challenges. It has in some respects added to their intractability and also produced new ones. One such challenge is coping with, and responding to, the diversification of practices and (constantly changing) expectations that it is proliferating (vs. the one-size-fits-all of their mainstream embodiments). Another challenge is acknowledging the evolving audiences’ viewing capacities and receptivity to multimedial products, now also systematically available for repeated consumption online. There is also increasing individualization of practices, e.g. to particular communities of viewers with shared needs and group-specific expectations engaging in participatory practices (fans of film or TV series, for example) (Pérez-González 2014), and increasing pressure to deliver subtitling at ever shorter notice, both within these communities (e.g. for immediate access to new episodes) and in the industry. Fast turnover has knock-on effects on quality, but these are as conceptual and the result of paradigm shifts as they are practical and the by-product of tight deadlines, or working conditions for professional subtitlers. With the proliferation of practices defying accepted norms, the long undisputed ideals of top down representational accuracy, fidelity, and authenticity in mainstream film and cultural products are being called into question with bottom-up amateur/collaborative practices, in which affectivity, subjectivity and social engagement are the main drivers (Pérez-González 2012, 2014), heralding fundamental change.

Means and modes of meaning in subtitling

With the unbound creativity of fansubbers and amateur subtitling in their reaction to the linguistic and cultural standardization of industry products, subtitling has been given public licence to shake off the shackle of some of its most constraining practices, and the opportunity to review their ideological implications. By the same token, transformational practices are an incentive for subtitling to re-evaluate its specificities as an expressive medium: do we have the full measure of textual stylization, the inevitable by-product of medial constraints in mainstream practices and their greatest bane, but paradoxically perhaps also their greatest gift?

Fansubbing emerged in the 1980s as a reaction against the neutralization in US productions of Japanese animated films of anything linguistically and culturally Japanese. With their freer uses of colours, typefaces, typography, variable length of subtitle text, siting on screen, and novel uses of notes and glosses superimposed on visuals to provide explanatory comments about what is seen and heard ('thick translation', a notion critiqued in Hermans 2003), fansubbers are circumventing accepted practices and conventions with deeply held principles at their core. Standard recommendations that subtitles should attract as little attention as possible, and interfere as little as possible with the processing of other semiotic resources are of little import to them.

There are well documented typologies of subtitling issues and strategies for dealing with them in line with these and other desiderata, relating to either medial constraints (space/time/textual fragmentation), or to aspects of linguistic and cultural mis-mappings across languages, as synthesized in Díaz Cintas and Remael 2007, for example. Two main strategies are generally identified in the field to deal with medial constraints: text reduction—with omission, condensation and/or reformulation, at word or phrase level—and syntactic adaptations to minimize the pressure of coping with text displayed sequentially in stand-alone segments; simple lexis is also preferred, likewise to ease the cognitive load.

Linguistic and cultural encoding encompass a range of other features or aspects. Chief among them as an issue in interlingual transfer are culture-bound terms and references, or 'extralinguistic cultural references' (ECRs) (Pedersen 2007, 2010) referring to people, places, customs, institutions, units of measurement, to give but a few examples, that are unknown and/or unintelligible to target viewers and candidates for glosses in amateur practices. Translation strategies in mainstream subtitling range from literal translations to complete recreations and omissions (Agost Canós 2004, Gottlieb 2009, Katan 1999/2004, Ramière 2010, Tomaszkiwicz 2001, Wyler 2003 among others). Humour and non-standard language are related and frequently focused on aspects. Like ECRs, they are more or less taxing depending on the cultural specificity of their manifestations, including puns, play on words, etc. (Vandaele 2002); and the degrees of acceptability for non-standard tokens—e.g. greater or lesser offensiveness of swear, curse or vulgar words. These are argued in the field to be more offensive and less well tolerated in the shift from evanescent speech to more enduring writing, and so prone to levelling (e.g. Lambert 1989). Amateur practices by contrast retain, gloss, make visible—inconspicuousness is not a concern, acculturation is. Is the polarization inevitable, in practices themselves, and in the conceptualization of issues?

How to represent in writing the oral in source dialogues has been another recurrently addressed challenge, and raises similar questions. Accents and colloquial or other traits that mark speakers out geographically and/or socioculturally seldom find a match across languages, causing a difficult tug in practices between 'incoherent localisation' with ill-adapted local varieties or 'banalising neutralisation' eschewing representation altogether (Ranzato 2010: 109). This extends to presence/absence in the representation of orality features that give source dialogues the feel of everyday conversation—filled and unfilled pauses, hesitations, discourse markers denoting particular verbal habits and other features of interpersonal verbal exchanges—and likewise play narratively significant functions in characterization. Like greetings, leave-takings and other pragmatic features of everyday communicative practices and verbally enacted phenomena like politeness tend to be first to go as non-essential when space is at a premium, and equivalence is an issue in any case—with at times significant implications for the depiction of, and response to, characters and interpersonal relationship (Hatim and Mason 1997, Remael 2003). Multilingualism, epitomized in its functions as a

narrative tool in Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*, for example (Mingant 2010, O'Sullivan 2011) is a further aspect at the centre of representational practices debates.

In all, 'loss' has never been far from the surface as a driving theme. Indeed, it is an easy bone to pick when text is taken at its face value in constrained contexts, and has therefore found an easy echo in equally literal public overt responses. With the creativity of non-mainstream practices as a counterpoint, there is scope to revisit loss assumptions from fresh perspectives, and to explore alternative views. Has the emphasis in film subtitling on the inevitable by-products of reduction and vicissitudes of cross-linguistic transfer come in the way of giving it due credit for its potential as a meaning-resource on its own terms? In other words, have so-called 'constraints' on subtitling and linguistic difference and how to deal with them masked just how creative and expressive subtitling can be in its own right? This, too, is a debate for subtitling for the twenty-first century, with a root in perennial translation studies dichotomies/tensions, and implications for accessibility/creativity arguments.

In the tussle for producing meaning in the multimodally rich but spatially constrained film context of mainstream professional subtitling, priority is given overall to the communicative intentions of source dialogues over textual and semantic detail, in a process argued to foster cultural and linguistic neutralization and standardization by suppressing non-mainstream identities (Fawcett 2003, Díaz Cintas 2005, Gambier 2013; Pérez-González 2009, 2014). The extent to which target texts should mirror source text practices, and are, can or should be adapted to target practices, communicative preferences and expectations—i.e. 'domesticated' for target audiences, a basic dilemma in translation studies—is a moot point in subtitling. Gambier documents domesticating practices as part of accessibility (2003). It amounts to giving audiences what they are used to, and conforming to the framework of target languages and their cultural codes—adapting *Harry Potter* to foreign markets by erasing all reference to the idiosyncratic UK public school system and language features associated with it, for example. Nornes denounces domestication as 'corrupt' and advocates instead a subtitling that avoids the erasure of difference and strives 'to intensify the interaction between the reader and the foreign' (Nornes 2007: 178–9—chapter 5 was first published in 1999). 'Abusive subtitling', mainstay of fansubbing by choice and by dint of fansubbers keeping close to original text, with wordier, more word-for-word subtitles (Gambier 2013: 53–4), brings to the fore the transgressive nature of Nornes' preferred strategies. Whether it is subscribed to or not, his radical take is an incentive to engage with questions of linguistic and cultural representation, to this day still comparatively neglected. They have produced some debates, in practice and theory, as just noted. Oddly in view of the unprecedented exposure to AVT-mediated cultural products worldwide, the impact on audiences of AVT-mediated cross-cultural representations, and of the cultural mismatch noted earlier in shaping them, has been barely looked into, with only brief mentions in updates on AVT developments. It is signposted as raising questions, about 'the power of subtitling in the dissemination and entrenchment of certain concepts and realities in other cultural communities' in Díaz Cintas (2013: 278), for example. It is beginning to attract more attention, with input from cross-cultural pragmatics considered in the next section.

Mainstream subtitling cannot ever fully emulate source dialogues, let alone naturally occurring speech. Nor is it necessarily desirable, or defensible, as foregoing debates suggest. The specificities and intrinsic expressive potential of subtitles as text have rarely been a feature in these debates, however. The language choices and strategies that are a by-product of constraining factors (textual condensation, synthesis, modulation, etc.) give subtitles conspicuous formal, linguistic and pragmatic/sociocultural distinctiveness. Their syntactic simplicity, paratactic nature, additive build-up of meaning sequentially in

stand-alone units affiliates them more to speech than to writing (Halliday 1987), for example. The extent to which such differentiating features have a role in generating meaning, in their own terms and in their interaction with other semiotic resources, has tended to be obscured in face-value textual comparisons highlighting what subtitles miss out. Subtitles' capacity to generate their own sets of internal linguistic and pragmatic settings, and harness to this end the stylized interplay of features like punctuation, register shifts, lexical and other contrasts heightened by omission and reduction, has become a feature in a growing number of studies, explicitly or implicitly (De Meao 2012 [representation of dialects], Guillot 2007, 2008, 2010 [orality, punctuation, interpersonal address], Longo 2009 [dialects], Ranzato 2010, 2011 [dialects, stylistic specificities, non-standard language]). They are conspicuous for shifting the perspective away from the relationship between source and target to subtitling as a meaning-making resource on its own terms, and an in-built cognitive dimension recognizing in text the capacity to trigger types of experience on the basis on a few integrated cues—e.g. of orality, in line with Fowler's theory of mode (1991); see Guillot 2010, 2012a, 2012b for applications to subtitling. This stance finds corroboration in professional subtitlers' accounts of their own practices, and trust in audiences' capacity to respond to representational conventions established internally within film and their subtitles (Bannon 2009/2013, for example). It is a key feature in emergent debates about cross-cultural representation, and their linguistic drive to acknowledge AVT as generating distinctive language varieties and registers, and subtitling as endowed with a greater capacity to mean in its own right, within its broader multimodal context and together with it, than it has generally been credited for in mainstream practices.

Amateur practices are concurrently argued more and more to assume a non-representational function, and to eschew the referential for the affective with forms of translation that showcase the expression of subjective spectatorial experience (Pérez-González 2014). Debates about representation and creativity in mainstream subtitling may seem almost paradoxical in this sense. If, on the other hand, the productivity of subtitling as a construct able to generate its own system of in-text multimodal representation rests not with a capacity to achieve sameness, but with 'a capacity to diversify the dialectics of difference' (Guillot 2012b: 118), as such debates also make room to contend, they produce an interesting counterpoint for the creativity perspectives of transformational practices.

Research and methodologies

There is 'a danger that future research could be tempted to focus primarily on new technological advances and the possibilities they offer, to the detriment of the linguistic, pedagogical, cultural, commercial and political issues that continue to lie at the heart of screen translation in its various forms' warns O'Connell in a 2007 overview of screen translation (2007: 132).

AVT research has matured in the last ten to fifteen years, all the while having to keep pace with technological developments inconceivable just a decade or two ago, and reshaping the world of subtitling in ways that are immeasurably complex to account for. Doing justice to the linguistic and cultural spheres as well as the technical dimension remains a leitmotiv, now with ever more explicit calls for a plurality of standpoints and for the interdisciplinarity of approaches that the breadth of the field requires (Díaz Cintas 2013, Gambier 2013, Pérez-González 2014).

There have been recurrent themes: achieving a less fragmented, more coherent field of research paying due heed to multimodality and the complementarity of different meaning-making semiotic codes and a better empirical understanding of reception processes is a

main one still, for screen translation and for subtitling. They are central in Gambier's 2003 mapping of the field, and in his 2013 update. His recurrent admonitions to move beyond the text and fully engage in the study of the interplay of the verbal and non-verbal modes, are an index of how exacting multimodality has been to account for, despite the development of multimodal transcription tools to capture the various elements involved and characterize their dynamic interaction in their joint meaning-making processes (Thibault 2000, Baldry and Thibault 2006, with applications in Taylor 2003 and Desilla 2009 for example). The same sense of demandingness is manifest in his renewed call for experimental studies on viewer's processing habits, reading strategies and receptions patterns, and the three Rs: response, reaction and repercussion—referring, respectively, to perceptual decoding (lisibility), psycho-cognitive issues (readability) and attitudinal issues (viewers' preferences and habits, and the sociocultural in the broader non-diegetical contexts that influences the receiving process) (Gambier 2013: 57). In his 2009 encyclopedia entry for AVT, Pérez-González warns against piecemeal anecdotal approaches, prescriptivism, and lack of theorization. These are recurrent themes in his 2014 state of the art volume on theories, methods and issues in AVT, where they share centre stage with amateur/participatory subtitling practices as agents of change, in practice and theory.

Un(der)-specified theoretical context, un(der)-specified methodology, un(der)-specified research questions, anecdotal observations, conclusions and generalizations on the basis of limited evidence and small decontextualized text segments in micro-level fragmented analyses, insufficient consideration of the interdependence of linguistic choices and narrative/filmic structure and modes, and concurrent neglect of macro-perspectives in approaching subtitle text may all have a good deal to answer for in perpetuating debates about limitations and loss, to some extent unhelpfully.

The field has evolved all the same and moved on. Like AVT generally, film subtitling is at a turning point and is embracing the new sets of challenges that will establish it fully as a discipline, for which technology has given it new tools. In reception, for example, cutting-edge equipment like eye trackers has spurred a spate of research updates on past studies, with trail-blazing empirical work on untested assumptions about reading and psycho-cognitive responses in mainstream subtitling practices, in line with Gambier's calls. The work also extends to the impact on processing of new features like the 'pop-up' hypertext notes common in amateur subtitling, and now finding their way in mainstream practices and popularized in non-subtitled media products like the recent *Sherlock* BBC1 series in the UK (2010, 2012, 2014) (Bairstow 2011, Caffrey 2008, Künzli and Ehrensberger-Dow 2011, Kruger 2012, Rajendran *et al.* 2013). With other methods of data collection (e.g. consecutive questionnaires, corpus groups) they are giving the field scope to develop a better understanding of viewers' responses and needs, and of their processing potential. Digitization and text processing software are facilitating data collection, storing and analysis, and more systematic corpus-based work supplementing the case study approaches that have been a main methodology for subtitling studies from their early days. Dubbing is ahead of the game with corpus work (see Baños *et al.* 2013, for example), but it is building up for subtitling (Sotelo Dios 2011, Sotelo Dios and Guinovart 2012, Tiedemann 2007, Tirkkonen-Condit and Mäkisalo 2007). Copyrights, software compatibility, methodological harmonization, and access remain key concerns in both. Digitization is also promoting cross-fertilization at a conceptual, methodological and technical level, giving AVT the benefits of the interconnectedness of the research world.

While technology has been a boost to subtitling research, it is also getting further insights from harnessing the tools of other disciplines, including linguistics and the study

of communicative practices and preferences across languages and cultures in cross-cultural pragmatics. The models and approaches identified as contributing to AVT research bear witness to the variety of angles that have informed it (psycholinguistic, cognitive, neurolinguistics pragmatic for process models; shift-based and corpus driven for comparative models; systems and norm-based, discourse and ideological for causal models, as documented in Pérez-González 2014). Cross-cultural pragmatics has been surprisingly untapped until recently, and is critical for addressing an overarching, largely uncharted and increasingly topical question for film subtitling: its cross-cultural impact on audiences, and related unresolved issues of description and representation. The question encapsulates just about every aspect of subtitling and is complex. It is sketched out below from the points of view of description and reception by way of final synthesis of lesser catered-for aspects of subtitling.

From an AVT research point of view, we are beginning to understand better how subtitling simulates spoken language within the multimodal polysemiotic film context and the constraining factors that make subtitle text linguistically, pragmatically and socioculturally distinctive. What is central for description, however, and research in cross-cultural representation, is documenting the extent to which subtitling texts bear the pragmatic imprint of source dialogues, and of naturally occurring speech, and how: is it literal, or conveyed through idiosyncratic expressive means that produce language varieties or registers in their own right? This is a recent domain of research in AVT. Pavesi has led the way for dubbing, with corpus-based work that highlights dubbing's creative specificity, and the capacity of selected target language features to convey pragmatic meaning and sociolinguistic variation symbolically and non-randomly (e.g. as privileged carriers of orality, markers of otherness in pronominal address, sites of cross-linguistic variation in demonstratives; Pavesi 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2014). Similar mimetic processes have been identified in case study work for subtitling, and situated pragmatic indexing across a range of features and communicative practices—including pronominal address, greeting/leave-takings, phonings (Guillot 2010, 2016). Other relevant findings are building up in studies with an explicit pragmatics focus and methodological framework—e.g. on politeness, speech acts like advice requests, apologies or compliments, greetings, swearing, implicatures (Bruti 2009a, 2009b; Desilla 2012, Greenall 2011, Mubenga 2015, Pinto 2010), and studies with an incidental pragmatics dimension, explicit or implicit, simply by virtue of their dealing with language use—e.g. dialects, humour (Longo 2009, Ranzato 2010). Results of these studies need to be collated in order to acquire critical mass, and be more robustly accounted for and harmonized methodologically.

In reception, the cross-cultural dimension of subtitling has been largely by-passed, except for a few studies of humour (e.g. Fuentes Luque 2003) and one empirical study of comprehension of implicit meaning across cultures (Desilla 2014). Issues from a cross-cultural angle relate to distinctive features of the reception process for audiences: suspension of linguistic disbelief, and the cultural mismatch between the foreign seen on screen (e.g. Chinese, French, Spanish, etc.) and pragmatic expectations and perceptual frames triggered by (stylized) subtitled text in their own language (e.g. English and how politeness is enacted in English, in greetings, requests, disagreements, etc.). The extent to which this discrepancy impacts on viewers' responses to foreign language films is untested. Does AVT produce misperceptions and promote linguistic stereotyping (e.g. rudeness for Spanish in Spanish-to-English subtitling as argued by Pinto 2010), or can it override stereotypical responses by activating its own interpretative modes, with selected features indexing particular pragmatic values (Guillot's and Pavesi's stance)? There is no empirical evidence for either

position, or any other, and research is overdue. It is complex and requires cross-disciplinary input. There is expertise relevant to a cross-cultural approach in audience and reception research—including of audience profiling in film and television studies, and of perceptual and psycho-cognitive aspects in the audiovisual accessibility research referred to above. There is also empirical know-how from research at the interface of cognitive linguistics and translation (Rojo 2015). How this expertise can be harnessed to the specific challenges of assessing subtitling's impact on audiences' perceptually mediated cross-cultural response and literacy is a pending question. It is an important step for subtitling research, in itself and to boost further the educational value of subtitling, already acknowledged for foreign language learning (Gambier *et al.* 2015), and to give it and AVT generally its proper place as a tool for cross-cultural exchange.

Accessibility has from the early days been a central theme for film subtitling and subtitling research, and a normative drive in the industry with repercussions on every aspect of the practice. With digitization and the opportunities it has produced for subtitling to move out into the public sphere and the hands and practices of consumers-turned-prosumers, creativity has become an increasingly defying force. For Pérez-González, the self-mediation practices that are already having an influence on the production and translation of commercial media content offer 'a unique opportunity to learn about how audiovisual translation can be done, rather than simply represent how the industry wants it done' (2014: 230). What lies ahead for subtitling is the thrilling prospect of reconceptualizing itself through this exploration, in practice and in theory, and from within, as a distinctive and powerful medium of intercultural exchange in a global context.

Related topics

- 2 History of audiovisual translation
- 6 Subtitling for deaf and hard of hearing audiences: moving forward
- 7 Respeaking: subtitling through speech recognition
- 13 Spoken discourse and conversational interaction in audiovisual translation
- 14 Psycholinguistics and perception in audiovisual translation
- 15 Narratology and audiovisual translation
- 16 Pragmatics and audiovisual translation
- 18 Sociolinguistics and linguistic variation in audiovisual translation
- 20 Corpus-based audiovisual translation studies: ample room for development
- 22 Eye tracking in audiovisual translation research
- 23 Audiovisual translation and audience reception
- 30 Audiovisual translation in language teaching and learning

Further reading

- Bannon, D. (2009/2013) *The Elements of Subtitles: A Practical Guide to the Art of Dialogue, Character, Context, Tone and Style in Film and Television Subtitling*, Blackstock: Translation Studies Press | *A practical guide to dialogue, character, context, tone and style in film and television subtitling, offering a professional perspective on subtitling in practice and original insights into its various aspects.*
- Díaz Cintas, J. and A. Remael (2007) *Audiovisual Translation: Subtitling*, Manchester: St Jerome | *A staple subtitling handbook providing a comprehensive overview that combines subtitling research and professional expertise. Supplied with a DVD with WinCaps subtitling software, instructions for use and exercises.*

- Nornes, A. M. (2007) *Cinema Babel: Translating Global Cinema*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press | *A pioneering and provoking discussion of subtitling from a film/media perspective, within global cinema context. The volume includes (Chapter 5) 'For an Abusive Subtitling', Nornes' critical discussion of so-called 'corrupt' and 'abusive' practices first published in Film Quarterly, 52(3), 17–34.*
- Pérez-González, L. (2014) *Audiovisual Translation: Theories, Methods and Issues*, London & New York: Routledge | *Essential guide to audiovisual translation research and benchmark for the discipline to establish its authority in the twenty-first century.*

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Filmography

Inglourious Basterds (2009) Quentin Tarantino. IMDb entry: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0361748/?ref=fn_al_tt_1

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