Voice-Over

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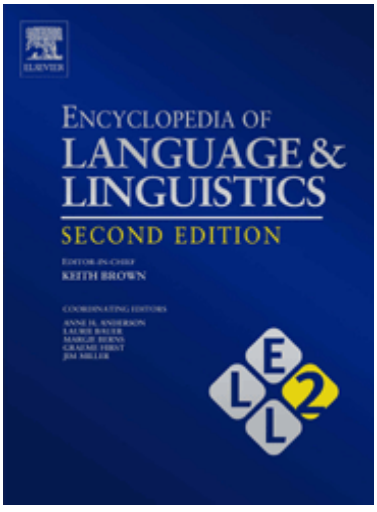

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Voice-Over

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The OED (Brown, 1993: 3596) defines voice-over as "narration spoken by an unseen narrator in a film or a television program; the unseen person providing the voice," whereas Webster's online gives us the following definition: "the voice of an unseen narrator speaking (as in a motion picture or television commercial) b: the voice of a visible character (as in a motion picture) expressing unspoken thoughts." In both instances, the underlying approach used to define the term belongs clearly to the realm of Media and Film Studies rather than Translation Studies, as they do not imply any translating activity and no mention of language transfer is made. The English term has been arbitrarily borrowed and adapted by other languages and by Audiovisual Translation Studies scholars who use it in a rather different way, transcending the technical side and incorporating a translation dimension. This dual use of the sameterm with two clearly different meanings is responsible for some terminological confusion.

Very few efforts have traditionally been channeled into the study of this translation mode, a situation that mirrors the lack of interest shown by academics in the more general area of Audiovisual Translation (AVT). The relatively recent boom in AVT has generated much research activity in the field although centering mainly on its two most popular modes of transfer, subtitling and dubbing, bypassing somehow other techniques such as voice-over, surtitling, narration, interpreting, and commentary. It is revealing that no separate entry on voice-over can be found in academic dictionaries and encyclopedias of Translation Studies, having being systematically classified as a subcategory under the umbrella terms of dubbing and revoicing (Shuttleworth and Cowie, 1997: 45; Baker, 1998: 75). In these pages, voice-over is understood as one of the distinct and independent translation modes applied when translating audiovisual programs (for a detailed taxonomy, see Gambier, 1994, 1995, who distinguishes up to 10 different modes).

Another inaccuracy that stems from the two previous dictionary entries is the fact that voice-over is not restricted to motion pictures or the television alone and it is actually much used in radio programs, for instance, on the BBC World Service. Hence, the umbrella term Screen Translation would seem inappropriate in this case as it only applies to translation done for media that are received through a screen. A wider term such as Audiovisual Translation, encompassing all media translation modes, might seem better for this type of activity.

From a Translation Studies perspective, voice-over can be defined as a technique in which a voice offering a translation in a given target language (TL) is heard simultaneously on top of the source language (SL) voice. As far as the soundtrack of the original program is concerned, the volume is reduced to a low level that can still be heard in the background when the translation is being read. It is common practice to allow the viewer to hear the original speech in the foreign language for a few seconds at the onset of the speech and to reduce subsequently the volume of the original so that the translated speech can be inserted. The translation usually finishes several seconds before the foreign language speech does, the sound of the original is raised again to a normal volume and the viewer can hear once more the original speech.

Unlike subtitling, in which there is a shift of medium from an oral discourse in a SL into a written text in a TL that normally appears at the bottom of the screen, voice-over remains in the oral medium in the same way as dubbing. Although there is a certain degree of audio synchrony in the delivery of the original and the translated text – the narrator's voice being heard over the on-screen speaker's voice – one of the main differences with dubbing is that voice-over does not make any attempt to recreate the illusion of lip synchronization. Whereas dubbing pretends that the people on screen speak the same language as the viewer, voice-over is a reminder of the difference and the need for translation. The viewer is constantly aware through the auditory channel of the presence of a foreign language, making voice-over, as well as subtitling, a prime example of what in House's terminology (1981) will be an overt translation, i.e., the program is always presented and perceived as a translation.

There are primarily two professionals involved in this technique: the translator and the voice-over narrator or artist. The former deals with the linguistic transposition from a language into another, whereas the latter is in charge of reading the text in the target language. One of the reasons for this distinction is that more often than not, translators would not possess the desired voice quality and voice artists would not be qualified linguists. The implications of this split have been discussed in detail by Allouba (1992), who raises some thorny issues: the inappropriate mutilation of parts of the translated text, the rightful owner of the copyright and the (in)visibility of the translator.

For commentators such as Luyken *et al.* (1991: 80) the cohabitation of two languages is regarded as a positive factor, as it "contributes to the sense of authenticity in the translation and prevents a degree of mistrust from developing," an opinion that is also shared by Pönniö (1995: 304) for whom voice-over is the ideal translation solution if one wants to give an idea of the interlocutor's tone and way of speaking. Nevertheless, one should be fully aware that this is nothing but an illusion and, as Franco (2001: 290) points out, "the type of delivery we hear in voice-over translation is an important strategic way of reassuring viewers that what they are being told in their own language is what is being said in the original language, although it is known that what they will be listening to is in fact only a *representation* of the original discourse." Although in most countries the standard language variation is used in the translation irrespective of the lexical and paralinguistic characteristics of the SL speech, this drive to promote and foreground the sense of authenticity has given raise to new, bold approaches to voice-over. The change in attitude that has taken place toward the use of voice-over in television is best exemplified in the United Kingdom, and more particularly in the way it is done by the BBC. Thus, where the traditional practice "was to use sedately delivered Received Standard Pronunciation, [. . .], it is now the custom, out of deference to the Other, to use English with the appropriate foreign accent" (Fawcett, 1996: 76). This means that if the person on screen speaks Spanish, the voice-over narrator will read the translation in English with a clear foreign accent, showing the characteristic inflexions that are associated with a Hispanic person speaking English. However, we would argue that this approach is far from being unequivocal and lends itself to debate, as it could also be interpreted as a sign of the inability of foreign people to speak English correctly.

Like subtitling, voice-over has considerable advantages over dubbing in terms of costs. It is technically less complex and demanding since there is no need to adapt the translation to fit the movement of the lips, which has led some authors to state that voice-over does not pose any demands for synchrony (Lambert and Delabastita, 1996; Grigaravičiūte and Gottlieb, 1999), and the only requirement is that the length of the translation is relatively similar to that of the original speech. The apparent lack of media constraints has prompted some scholars to describe it as the easiest and most faithful of AVT modes (Díaz Cintas, 1997: 112; Grigaravičiūte and Gottlieb, 1999: 43). However, the fact that the limitations imposed by the audiovisual media are less stringent in voice-over than in subtitling or dubbing does not mean that they do not exist. Given that the translation starts a few seconds after the original and finishes a bit earlier, there tends to be a demand for lexical reduction in the translation so that the oral delivery does not sound rushed and unnatural when recorded, although voice-overs do admit considerable variation in respect of this type of synchrony. Besides time constraints, and given that we are dealing with a polysemiotic program, the translation will also have to pay attention to any possible linkage between text and image in the original. So, when the SL enunciation is supported by visual images, the translation will have to resort to solutions that, as far as possible, also recreate the link between the two dimensions at the same point in the program. From a technical dimension, the translated text has a time code – TCR – that must be followed in order to keep synchrony with the images. Lack of synchrony in this respect can lead to a negative perception on the part of the viewers.

The oral performance dimension is also simplified as the TL voices do not need to resemble those of the original program and the voice-over speaker – revoicer – does not need to have trained as an actor. The recording is usually carried out by one, or possibly two people – for male and female voices – rather than by several dubbing actors, reducing the labor costs considerably.

The other additional advantage of voice-over is that the amount of time it requires to be completed is far less than for dubbing and can therefore be used for the translation of programs in which there is very little time for preparation before it is due to be broadcast or sent back to the client.

Given its particular nature, voice-over has been traditionally favored in the audiovisual media to translate programs belonging to nonfictional genres, in order to account primarily for an interview answer or series of answers from an interviewee that speaks a different language to the TL audience. Documentaries, current affairs, news and political debates are translated in this way. In countries such as Spain, voice-over is a more common mode of AVT than subtitling, and it is the leading mode when people are interviewed on TV programs, from news and sports to gossip and even reality shows. When foreign Presidents or Prime Ministers have something to say in current affairs, it reaches the Spanish audience through voice-over. For authors such as Kilborn (1993: 648), this transfer mode is "particularly well suited as a method for the rendering of speeches by foreign politicians," so much so that "many in the audience would now deem it wholly inappropriate if any other mode were used."

In addition to interviews, voice-over is also used to translate films and other programs in countries like Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. Depending on resources, one or several actors narrate the translation while the original voices are heard as well. There tends to be a greater flexibility in the way the translation is inserted on top of the original language, without the need to leave the original running for a few seconds before hearing the TL text. This type of voice-over is probably closer to what Hendrickx (1984) coined 'partial dubbing.'

Some scholars have classified voice-over as simultaneous interpreting (Gambier, 1994: 276). In our opinion, this approach adds to the confusion surrounding the term, implying that voice-over is used in live performance. However, there are good grounds for distinguishing between the two activities. Simultaneous interpreting of audiovisual programs takes place at the same time as the SL speech and is done live by an interpreter. Translation for voice-over, on the contrary, is done and recorded prior to the broadcasting of the program. The limits between the two modes can be blurred as in the case of news items that arrive shortly before transmission time and are simultaneously interpreted and recorded just in time to be broadcast. Kaufmann, whose many years of experience as an interpreter give her a certain authority, rejects this comparison completely. She makes a clear distinction between modes used in live broadcasting, *l'interprétation in situ*, that is, the simultaneous or consecutive interpreting of live debates and interviews (1995: 436), and modes used in programs recorded prior to broadcasting, *l'adaptation en aval*, that is, the subtitling, dubbing and voice-over of a program into a foreign language (1995: 438).

To conclude, it may be said that the prevailing terminological ambiguity surrounding the term voice-over reflects the scarce interaction between scholars and practitioners. Most important, the prevailing discourse on voice-over reveals that the actual conflict is not so much about terminology but about the object of study itself. That is, it seems that the status of voice-over as a mode of transfer *per se* has been neglected, mainly because it always appears as a technique or a subcategory associated with other well-known types of audiovisual translation.

See also: Dubbing; Subtitling.

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