# Translating for Television

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## 1. Introduction

Whereas a large number of books and articles have been written on general translation, surprisingly little has been done on screen translation. There are obviously several reasons for this, one of the most important probably being that writing such books requires both theoretical knowledge and practical experience. This combination seems to be in short supply.

*Translating for Television* has been an attempt at coming up with a handbook that not only covers the most important theoretical questions of subtitling and dubbing. An equally strong emphasis is on the practice of screen translation. The book provides practical advice and guidance for screen translators and translation students alike. This dual purpose is reflected in the present paper. Accordingly, parts 2 and 3 address a highly important theoretical question: How do subtitling and dubbing compare in terms of constraining factors? Part 4 is more practically oriented and gives an outline of the subtitling process.

## 2. Subtitling constraints

Some claim that subtitling is the intelligent screen translation approach. There is, however, no doubt that it has its constraints, the following being among the main ones.

### 2.3 Loss of information

In terms of expressing nuances the written word cannot compete with speech. Hence a large number of lexical items tend to be required in order to match what is conveyed by stress, rhythm and intonation. But normally the subtitler does not have room for wordy formulations or complex structures. Brevity is called for to enhance readability. And if the subtitles are to remain on the screen long enough for our audiences to read them, extensive condensation is a must. This results in a regrettable loss of lexical meaning.

In Norway, the amount of condensation has traditionally been said to vary between 20 and 40 per cent. I recently decided to obtain data on the current situation, and therefore compared the number of words in the source language (SL)-versions and Norwegian target language (TL)-versions of the following programs: *Joey* (episode 1), and *Desperate housewives* (episode 4). The amount of condensation was 29.4 per cent in the former and 27.8 per cent in the latter. These results fall well in with previous research and show that the loss of information is substantial. Measured in terms of number of words it is close to 30 per cent.

What is the situation when dubbing/lip synchronisation is chosen instead of subtitling? By way of obtaining an answer to this question, I examined the SL- and TL-versions of one episode of each of these programs: *Transformers* and *Duel Masters.* As far as the former was concerned, the TL-version contained 0.8 per cent fewer words than the original. The TL-version of Duel Masters contained 1.4 per cent more words than the original. But neither of

these two differences is statistically significant. The results therefore confirm our assumption that loss of information is not really a problem when this screen translation approach is used. Since loss of information is a problem in subtitling, it can be tempting to reduce the amount of condensation to a minimum. But the extent to which this can be done depends on how fast our television audiences are able to access the subtitles. According to Luyken et al. (1991), the reading speeds of hearing viewers hover around 150 to 180 words per minute. This is, however, subject to extensive variation - depending on the complexity of the linguistic and factual information that the subtitles contain. If lexical density is high, accessibility tends to be low, which calls for added subtitle exposure time.

Furthermore, film genre is said to affect readability. This is how Minchinton comments on love stories:

> […] viewers need not read many of the titles; they know the story, they guess the dialogue, they blink down at the subtitles for information, they photograph them rather than read them. (Minchinton 1993: 22)

He claims that crime stories may give translators and viewers a harder time. The subtitles have to be read if the action is to be understood.

Another point that Minchinton makes is that reading speeds can be affected by the viewers' attitude to the subject matters of programs or films. He suggests that the viewers are able to read the subtitles faster if they find a story exciting. But one could obviously argue that the more interesting the audiences find a film, the less inclined they are to spend the time reading.

As far as television subtitling is concerned, the amount of condensation varies between countries. If we compare the Scandinavian countries, stricter rules have traditionally applied in Sweden than in Norway and Denmark. The duration of a full double-line subtitle is supposed to be 6-7 seconds in Sweden, compared to five seconds in Denmark. The position of the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK) is that a full double-line subtitle should remain on the screen for at least six seconds.

Except for some research carried out in Sweden a couple of decades ago, the definitions of readability are based much more on common sense than on research results. By way of obtaining what I felt was necessary empirical evidence I decided to test whether the exposure time of Norwegian subtitles could be cut down on without significantly reducing readability and comprehension.

My samples were drawn from pupils/students at nine Norwegian lower and upper secondary schools. There were 508 respondents between 13–20 years of age, and the response rate turned out to be as high as 95 per cent. The samples should be random enough to constitute a representative cross-section of Norwegians in these age groups (Tveit 2005).

The results showed that the retention of textual information was only marginally reduced when the exposure time of each subtitle was cut by one second. Hence readability was not dramatically affected when the duration of a full double-line subtitle went down from six to five seconds. When the exposure time was cut by another second, however, the situation changed significantly, and most respondents lost out on an extensive amount of information. Cohesive devices are often considered omittable. But even though they are not carriers of representative function, they play an important role in making relationships and events explicit. A text that does not contain such words can be difficult to access, and dropping

cohesive devices in order to boost readability can therefore prove counterproductive. It may, indeed, reduce readability.

Some argue that subtitling is additive by definition, but few Scandinavian viewers benefit much from dialogues in Italian or Spanish being retained when it comes to understanding lexical meaning. But they may benefit greatly if the dialogues are in a language similar to their own. Therefore, comprehension is markedly facilitated for Norwegian television audiences when Swedish interviewees appear in for instance news bulletins. In addition to being subtitled into Norwegian, they keep their language.

Although my research indicates that it is possible to cut exposure time by a second, it is difficult to generalise in terms of reading speeds and standardised presentation rates. As mentioned, the complexity of the linguistic and factual information has to be taken into account.

A distinction has traditionally been made between television and video on the one hand and the cinema on the other. It has been assumed that identical subtitles are easier to read from a cinema screen than from a television screen. The reason for this has never been satisfactorily investigated, but it is assumed to have to do with the size of the screen and its characters – along with differences in resolution.

## 2.2 Lack of appropriateness

The spoken word contains dialectal and sociolectal features that are extremely difficult to account for in writing. This represents another constraining factor of subtitling.

Whereas speech tends to contain unfinished sentences along with redundancies and interruptions, writing has a higher lexical density and a greater economy of expression. In addition, written translations of speech often display a nominalisation tendency where verbal elements are turned into nouns. Hence it can be difficult to maintain the oral flavour when subtitles are arrived at. Dubbing can undoubtedly be at an advantage when it comes to keeping the register and appropriateness of the SL-version.

## 2.3 Visual constraints

Trying their best to read everything that has been translated, viewers often find it difficult to concentrate adequately on other important visual information - and sometimes on oral information as well.

Twenty years ago, cinema and television films were far from as fast cut as they tend to be now. This is undoubtedly an important reason why the history of subtitling does not reveal too much discussion of editing and camera manipulation techniques.

Visual aspects are now more of an issue, which reflects the impressive development in camera manipulation, sequence construction and program editing the last couple of decades. This does not only have to do with the number of cameras in filming and the way they are used, but also with what takes place when the filming of a program is complete. That is the stage when the various sections, with their shots, scenes and sequences, are assembled and edited.

It is increasingly important for the subtitles to be integrated with the film features and fall in with the rhythm of the visual information on the screen. This is far from easy to manage when the cutting of the film is picking up momentum and the flow of the shots is geared to the demands of the narrative and the effect on the audience.

## 2.4 Decoding constraints

Ambiguities in speech and writing often make decoding a difficult task for translators. Normally a translator has the chance of following up unclear linguistic or factual points. For the subtitler, however, this is not necessarily the case. One reason may be the lack of a manuscript.

The subtitler frequently does not have the time to obtain adequate knowledge of the context. In addition, the huge number of varieties of English - and the fact that the interviewees' command of the language can be far from satisfactory – can make translation a rather difficult process.

## 3. The constraints of dubbing and lip synchronisation

When we experience state-of-the-art lip synchronisation, it is not difficult to understand why it is the favoured screen-translation approach in large parts of the world. But the constraining factors of the approach are very obvious, indeed. The following are some of the main ones.

### 3.1 Authenticity is lost

A character's speech is an important part of his or her personality, closely linked to facial expressions, gestures and body language. Authenticity is sacrificed when a character is deprived of his or her voice and the audiences are treated to somebody else's instead. At the Cannes Film Festival in 2003, I interviewed 25 people working in the film industry about their screen translation preferences. All but two said they favoured subtitling. When asked why, most answered that they regarded subtitling as the most intelligent and authentic option. For an actor it must be strange to experience what his contribution has been turned into in different TL-versions. And it might seem a bit odd that directors do not put their foot down more often than they do.

### 3.2 Transnational voice qualities are sacrificed

When "linguistic transplantation" takes place, it is not only authenticity that is sacrificed. So is credibility, which may be particularly problematic in news and current-affairs programs. Reporters seem to be increasingly preoccupied with the dramatic effect subtitled interviews are claimed to have. This probably has to do with the transnational qualities of the human voice. Even if we do not understand the words of a foreign language, the voice itself can convey a great deal of information.

Although intonation patterns often vary from language to language, their universal elements should not be ignored. Along with pitch, stress, rhythm and volume, they contribute extensively to conveying information not only about the speaker, but also the context of which he is a part.

### 3.3 Educational value is sacrificed

Subtitling no doubt has an important educational value. Visitors to the Scandinavian countries are often impressed by the standard of English of people they meet. Rather than reflecting differing language teaching standards, it would seem like it is the pedagogical value of having access to the original soundtrack that is brought to bear.

### 3.4 Dubbing is expensive

Dubbing is a lot more expensive than subtitling. The fact that figures vary substantially possibly has to do with the relationship between supply and demand. Since trained actors have traditionally been in short supply in small countries like Norway, the cost of hiring them has been high. This has contributed to making subtitling a much cheaper alternative. Although the difference in costs has evened out a bit, dubbing is still 5-10 times more expensive. It might therefore seem odd that an increasing number of foreign film and television productions are dubbed for the Scandinavian markets. This was previously largely confined to cartoons and children's program, but we now see an interesting development in the case of other productions as well.

French cinema audiences have for many years been able to choose between dubbed and subtitled versions of major productions. Although it is still only the thin end of the wedge, a similar development can be seen in Scandinavia.

But how can dubbing be an acceptable alternative when it is so expensive? The argument seems to be that costs do not matter too much if revenues are big enough. If lip synchronisation can possibly attract bigger audiences, increased translation costs would not be too much of a problem. The television business is increasingly preoccupied with ratings. If a network is able to get an edge on its competitors, costs are not likely to hold it back.

### 3.5 Dubbing is time-consuming

The dubbing process normally takes considerable time. It is obviously not possible to invite in actors to play the parts of interviewees in news bulletins. The big US and European networks make use of voice-over instead. It is quite a speedy process, but it tends to distract the viewer who is so preoccupied with the initial voice that he or she loses out on parts of the voice-over.

### 4.0 The practice of subtitling

The subtitling process can be divided into the following steps:

Decoding
Finding equivalents
Entering text
Condensing
Time-coding

The distinctions are not always clear-cut and there is at times considerable overlapping. As a case in point, condensation and time-coding may go hand in hand. This is often the case when manual time-coding is used, the in-cue and out-cue values of each subtitle being entered after the wording itself has been arrived at.

## 4.1 Decoding

Decoding can often be a problem in screen translation. If rapid speech is combined with poor diction, decoding the message can be difficult. Background noise often adds to the problem. Extensive variation in dialects also contributes to reducing the accessibility of the spoken word.

In addition, the poor sound quality of television dialogues can be a real problem. This can make decoding the most difficult part of the subtitling process. In the case of films and other programs produced by foreign television or production companies, there tends to be a manuscript that can help the subtitler out. But the scripts are often written after the production of the program and may contain errors.

## 4.2 Finding equivalents

When decoding has been completed and the meaning of the SL-word established, it is time to look for TL-equivalents at the word, sentence and speech act levels. The target text should match the original in terms of correctness and appropriateness alike.

Whether a TL-term is considered to be equivalent depends on the definition of equivalence. Are we looking for equivalence in terms of meaning, or are form and effect important as well? Provided that decoding does not cause particular difficulty, it can be a relatively straightforward job to come up with the best TL-match. Sometimes, however, extensive research is called for to bring about the best possible option. To the extent that deadlines and other practicalities permit, technology has greatly added to the options open to us. The Internet is most definitely a key word here.

There are differences between spoken and written varieties of discourse which are of particular relevance to subtitlers. Conversational and written registers differ in terms of grammatical features and functional characteristics. Subtitling, however, is a written representation of speech, and therefore a kind of hybrid. Although it is definitely less repetitive and contains fewer redundancies than speech, it is essential that the subtitler has the oral flavour of the original dialogue in mind and is able to keep an essential part of its appropriateness.

## 4.3 Entering text

When Screen Electronics launched the PU 2020 subtitling unit in 1992, the television screen was made redundant for subtitlers having access to such state-of-the-art equipment.

This innovation made it possible for the user to position the text accurately in relation to the video picture. Other companies followed suit and came up with similar equipment. Now there are a number of alternatives on the market requiring only one screen.

## 4.4 Condensing

In the case of new and inexperienced subtitlers, condensation tends to take place after a rough translation has been provided. The reason is that they often find it extremely difficult to establish exactly which parts of the source text should be kept and which ones can be dispensed with.

A consequence of inadequate condensation is that the audiences are kept rather busy reading the text, therefore losing out on what is at least equally important: the visual information of the film.

Traditionally the amount of condensation has been more extensive in television programs than in cinema films. The argument has been that cinema subtitles are a lot more accessible and easier to read. This partly relates to the size of the screen and the definition of the characters. To my knowledge, however, there is no empirical evidence to bear out the argument. It seems to me that the quality of cinema translation is not good enough on this score, and it might be high time that something was done to add to subtitle readability.

In addition to addressing the question of what constitutes an appropriate amount of condensation, one has to decide which words should be kept and which could be left out without causing too much entropy. By way of reducing the dialogue, omissions have to be made on a selective basis. Slight omissions can sometimes cause considerable changes in meaning. To avoid this, it is important that the elements of propositional meaning are retained.

It may be difficult to maintain the expressive force of the original when the number of TL-words has to be limited. But support from the original soundtrack nevertheless contributes to keeping the overall meaning of a film and often makes it possible to convey emotive content, even if temporal constraints limit the number of words used.

As they can be dropped without changing the meaning of the source dialogue, conjunctions come in handy for screen translators who have to cope with temporal and spatial constraints. In addition to causal conjunctions, there are additive, adversative and temporal ones. 'And' is an example of additive conjunctions. It is relatively often dropped, the two connecting clauses being turned into sentences.

It takes time for subtitlers to develop a sense of which linguistic elements in the original are least important and relevant, and therefore can be omitted without losing too much information.

*4.5 Time-coding*

After a stretch of the source dialogue has been decoded, translated and condensed, the time has come to supply it with in- and out-cues. How much is done in one go, varies a great deal from subtitler to subtitler. Some formulate/condense/enter one subtitle and then time-code it before proceeding to the next subtitle. Others find it convenient to translate/condense/enter the entire report/program before time-coding it. Most subtitlers, however, strike a medium by dividing longer programs up into parts, and translating/condensing/time-coding one part before proceeding to the next. This approach enables them to get into the flow of the dialogue and catch the rhythm of the exchanges, something that is often essential for precise and elegant cueing.

There are basically two different ways of cueing subtitles. One is to enter the cues manually in the in- and out-frames. The subtitler stops the video player when the speaker starts saying a sentence, registers the precise code as displayed at the top of the picture, and then enters it into the cue window.

## 5. Some concluding remarks

By way of summing up, the present paper discusses some of the theoretical and practical aspects of *Translating for Television, A Handbook in Screen Translation.* A main emphasis has been the medium defined constraining factors of the profession – with a particular view to subtitling. But I have also tried to give an outline of the subtitling process.

## References

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