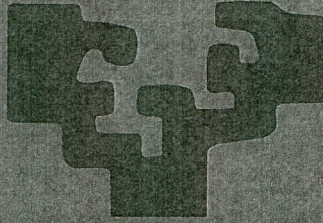eman ta zabal zazu

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SUBTITLING:
A TYPE OF TRANSFER

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Basically, Europe is divided with regard to audiovisual and cross-linguistic communication into two parts:

– the dubbing countries, such as France, Germany, England, Spain, Italy or Austria, with a dominant language
– the subtitling countries, such as Portugal, Greece, Wales, the Netherlands or the Nordic Countries, with a so-called "small language".

This division, and the development of the two 'camps', need to be explained. The usual choice between dubbing and subtitling is too often a rhetorical question because it pretends that the problem is a purely technical and financial one, not involving issues of language policy, educational and social policy. How, then, are we to understand the fact that the Basque Country uses only dubbing in Basque on its single TV channel?

In Finland, some 3,000 foreign TV programmes are shown per year, up to seven per evening. This would correspond to reading approximately 200 novels of 300 pages each, a total of 60 thousand pages or a complete novel every other day. We are watching and reading TV!

Let us keep in mind also the multiplicity of audiovisual messages: documentary films, short-length films, business videos, fiction turned into cinema, home videos, TV broadcasts, children's programmes and radio interviews. Cinema, video and TV do not call for precisely the same type of subtitling, for two kinds of reasons:

– technical and economical reasons:
* they are different importers, requiring different working conditions
* the speed of the picture is different
* the definition of the screen is different
– linguistic reasons: in Finland, for instance, bilingual subtitling is used in the cinema and monolingual on TV.

Up till now, research has mainly been concerned with the subtitling and dubbing of fictive stories/ fiction films. In the light of the huge variety of audiovisual communication, this may seem somewhat surprising; in fact, however, it reflects the prevailing orientation in translation theory, which is still highly dominated by literary translation.

In this paper, we shall discuss 1) some issues in international audio-visual communication, 2) some specific features of subtitling and 3) a short panorama of problems related to this type of language transfer.

I THE ISSUES AT STAKE IN INTERNATIONAL AUDIOVISUAL COMMUNICATION

The internationalization process of electronic media is governed, so to say, by three principles: the principles of the market economy, of political ideology and of technological development.

First, the principle of market economy. This means in practice that revenues are shared by numerous producers; but it also means the rationalization of production and distribution costs. The key words in the recent development of the media are liberalization and privatization. And this has taken place in a domain which can be regarded as having been, until very recently in most European countries, controlled, if not actually monopolized, by the public authorities. One example of this process of liberalization is the European Community directive which came into force in October 1991, permitting, for example, multinational publicity/ advertising on European screens. The competitive exigencies have become more and more challenging.

Secondly, political issues. On the one hand, the wish to be or to become international on a global or European scale obliges one to be present on the screen. Yet cultural cooperation with the developing countries cannot be left out of consideration either. On the other hand, our recent past gives us several examples of the debate on the relationship between domestic and foreign broadcasting, concerned with protecting the national identity of a given country or community.

And finally, technological development, which of course means satellites, cables, high definition TV etc, but also research in the field of the language industries. What happens here also affects the production, administration and consumption of audiovisual communication.

The structural changes taking place in what could be called the cultural industry generate both centripetal and centrifugal movements. Centripetal because resources and information tend to be concentrated; centrifugal in the sense that the expanding transmission of audiovisual communication is considered a necessity. Several projects, such as the audiovisual Eureka, the standardization of norms, and the creation of various committees and special funds within the Council of Europe, the EC Commission and the EBU (European Broadcasting Union) reflect, each in their own way, these two forms of movement.

There is also a linguistic question involved, which plays a role in all of the three issues raised above. The media are by definition highly linguistic, which in turn sets limits to their geographical expansion and makes their internationaliza-

tion process a complex phenomenon. In the vital process of widening the markets, it is necessary not only to take into account these limitations and to redefine the needs of the markets but also to find the right means of adapting the audiovisual communication to meet these needs. Already now we can see a differentiation process taking place among programs - those intended for a wide audience and those aimed at specialists, such as the European Financial TV. On the other hand, the music and sports channels are a good example of a policy that has opted for programs that can be exported as cheaply as possible, with limited costs arising from the transmission of the linguistic content. Needless to say, linguistic and culture-specific issues will have quite a different weight on the cultural channels, such as Arte, the French-German channel which started in autumn 1992.

Since audiovisual communication is heavily affected by the three factors discussed (marketing, politics and technology), it is impossible to study one particular aspect (the linguistic one) without taking into account the material, financial and technological issues at stake. In fact, audiovisual communication should give rise to a socio-critical study of translation, in this case subtitling. Cross-linguistic and intercultural studies of communication should not be a mere reckoning of what has been omitted. On the other hand, the simple statement, that there are countries which prefer subtitling and others which prefer dubbing, neither adds to our understanding of the rationale of translation policies, nor does it give us a better understanding of the evolution and forms of national and cultural identities.

II SPECIFIC FEATURES OF SUBTITLING

2.1 Oral vs. written discourse

The traditional approach to translation and interpretation has often relied on the following conceptions:

- the *output* is seen as a homogeneous, stable, finished product
- the product is uttered by a single 'locutor'
- the translation aims at an interlinguistically *'equivalent'* transfer of the 'original'.

In the case of media (TV, cinema) using different semiotic systems, one is rather inclined to talk about 'adjustment', resulting from both the complexity of the media (text and image), and from the immediate conditions of reception and interpretation of the message.

With a film, in fact, we must take into account at least four phases, each producing a meaning in collaboration between interlocutors:

- transformation of a linear text (fiction or non-fiction) into a *scenario* (or vice versa, which is less common). There are different types of scenario

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(contents and devices) according to the time, the situation of production, the conditions of writing, the dominant norms of discourse.

– switching /transformation /conversion from a scenario or a script to *dialogue* articulated by the actors (inter-semiotic translation, sometimes involving interlingual translation as well when the script and the actors represent different languages)

– relating *iconic and linguistic features* to one another (another kind of inter-semiotic translation)

– finally, interlingual transfer of dialogue in *subtitles*, a process which can be regarded as inter-semiotic and interlingual since it involves a) a change of code — the oral code is converted into a written code — and b) a change of language.

It should be stressed in this context that this double mutation is not characteristic of the cinema and TV alone; in numerous international conferences the debates are transcribed and stenographed and then reformulated in another language. Likewise, some operas are 'surtitled' or 'supratitled', i.e. the translations are shown above the scene, information first read and then broadcast in voice-over, to mention just some examples.

In the case of subtitling, the original message is delivered by various enunciators with different voices and different personalities, even if there was originally only a single author. But what is more, the message is not completed, since in passing from the scenarist to the director and the actors, it undergoes changes and transformations. Before reaching the spectator's eye, the message has thus in fact already been changed or adjusted several times. These changes are determined by different factors.

This being the case, it is too limited to reduce subtitling to a mere 'condensation' of a so-called 'original'. To regard subtitling as a 'reduction' in number of words is not applicable as a method of comparative analysis of intercultural communication. It is naturally easy to perceive and count the number of omissions, deletions and substitutions (e.g. phrases of politeness, exclamations and interjections). But to talk about reduction or adaptation is still to be under the spell of a quantitative, mathematical theory of information (information entropy) which considers cross-linguistic communication in terms of losses or additions and sees translation as a process of mimetic copying, a literal work, a repetitive duty. Rather than the mechanical computation of what is said and what is subtitled, it is important to study what is *transformed* and why. Reduction may be one of its components; it is not, however, a property of subtitling alone. It is also characteristic for example of interpretation and cartoon scripts. What is unique in subtitling as a form of selective translation is the fact that it operates at two levels simultaneously: (1) the change in code from the temporally organized oral code to the linear written code and (2) the switch from one language to another.

In writing, there is normally at least some delay between production and

reception, and thus no immediate feedback. Furthermore, no prosodic or pragmatic means are available. In the cinema, one characteristic of the written code (its recoverability) is weakened. Under normal conditions, the spectator does not have the possibility of going back in order to reinterpret the subtitling, and in that sense we come closer to the oral code. But whereas the multiform, co-produced oral message is intimately intertwined with the image, the interpretation of the written message (subtitling) creates a certain delay and distances the moment of interpretation and that of the appearance of the original complete message. The oral message is fused with various semiotic systems and thus activates the visual and auditive sensitivity of the spectator. In writing, the utterance is detached from other sense-making systems which are separated from one another, since the spectator's attention is now caught mainly monosensorially (the eye) and in one direction (from left to right). In addition, the written code is valued in our culture differently from the oral code. The anthropology of writing has shown the extent to which power is based on writing (verba volant, scripta manent) and the amount of power the written word possesses. In fact, when a written discourse is processed, it fascinates the reader more or less deliberately, even if he understands the original language behind the subtitles.

In processing subtitles, the spectator is caught by the various spontaneous meanings involved in visual, aural and paralinguistic signs. He becomes himself an enunciating subject of the utterance, thus adding his interpretations to those of the actors and the translator. He reads and interprets a text which itself is a double interpretation, from oral to written and from one language to another.

Seeing, hearing and reading are not only three different skills but their social and symbolic values are also different. If we 'interpret' a speech or 'translate' a text, what do we do with subtitling? Is subtitling translation merely because the end product is a written 'text', even though it deals both with a transcript and with the audible dialogue which the translator also interprets, and which the spectator can hear even if he does not understand it? Anyhow, the copyrights do not apply in the same way.

2.2. Norms

The difference between oral and written code is not clearcut but is rather a continuum. We have, for example, literary written discourse, cultivated written discourse, written discourse imitating the oral, cultivated oral discourse, and spontaneous oral discourse; the last of these has its own registers, such as ordinary, familiar and vulgar, which are in fact not easily defined. The stress on oral or written discourse varies in literary texts as well (dialogue, interior monologue, sociolectal markers). The degree to which these two codes are integrated varies from one literary genre to another, but also from one period to another, according to the status of written and spoken language during a given period and the prevailing stylistic norms.

However, even if there are similarities between literary translation and subtitling, the analogy soon reaches its limits. Once again, we should try to specify *what subtitling actually involves.*

What is said on the screen (the dialogue) has its origin in a written scenario. However, this does not mean that the actors merely recite the scenario. They also add to the written lines their own interpretation and their presence on the scene. Naturally they are directed by the director, but not even he can control, for example, the voice quality of the actors. Consequently, we have spoken about oral discourse in a communication situation which is partly limited by the scenarist and the writer. This is in contrast with the real author's procedure, where the output can be developed and polished ad infinitum and where the message is delivered by a single person, the author.

The translator is thus not in the same position as the author; the relationship between oral and written discourse is not the same in these cases, nor are the norms. A writer elaborates a written code and rhetorical conventions, in order to perpetuate, modify and/or go beyond them. The reception of his work and the underlying expectations are purely literary. A translator who is subtitling does not have the same rights. He must render in writing what has been formulated orally, but respecting at the same time both technical exigencies and a certain sacrality (fetishism) attached to written discourse in our culture. While one of the writer's tasks might be said to be to transgress certain taboos (thematic, stylistic or discoursal), the translator must respect 1) norms of good usage (avoiding elements considered extremely vulgar or offensive if they appear in written discourse), 2) readability (textual coherence being dependent on phenomena such as word order, repetition, a certain amount of redundance, discourse markers and pragmatic connectors that are very frequent in oral discourse (e.g. in French bon, ben, alors, à propos, tu sais, in English well, you know). This is one of the reasons why strong sociolinguistic variation or particular linguistic tricks typically characterizing the protagonists are often neutralized, making them unrecognisable and unmarked.

At this point it is worth asking the following question: What kinds of norms, if any, are followed in subtitling? It seems that no explicit norms are given to translators by broadcasting companies or film distributors. On the other hand, it is apparent that some of the countries where subtitling is used (e.g. Austria and the Flemish-speaking Belgium) have adopted standardized linguistic norms which have in fact been defined elsewhere, for example in Germany and in the Netherlands. Does their relative linguistic insecurity contribute to their desire to stick more closely to certain traditions of written discourse? And how about the situation in countries like Sweden and Norway or in the bilingual Finland? So far there have been no studies investigating possible similarities between the conventions of subtitling in Sweden and those of Swedish subtitling in Finland. Does the concept of bilingualism include other factors than those dis-

cussed here or do we simply have to look at these factors in a different way?

Having described the perspective from which we look at subtitling, we wish once more to emphasise our conviction that it is useless to reflect upon the process as a mere difference in lexical quantity (amount of words). Such a reductionist standpoint means ignoring the functional differences between oral and written discourse, between psycho-auditive if not audiovisual perception (comprehension-interpretation) and linear perception (comprehension-readability), and the culture-bound differences involved in both oral and written discourse.

An interesting analogy can be seen at this point between subtitling and simultaneous interpretation. In simultaneous interpretation, a discourse which is too colloquial, or which on the contrary follows the conventions of written discourse too strictly, tends to be transformed into 'cultivated' oral discourse, i.e. to be neutralized by either 'de-oralising' or 'oralising' the speech. As in subtitling, there is a tension between the codes, but the translator/ interpreter has a certain margin within which he or she can operate, thus being able to seek a balance between the heaviness of the formal and controlled discourse and the more or less normative expectations of the audience.

III PANORAMA OF PROBLEMS RELATED TO SUBTITLING

The mix of oral and written codes, together with the challenge posed by the ethical, linguistic, rhetorical, literary and cultural norms and conventions, opens up new perspectives for the consideration of subtitles. Instead of studying examples from our corpus of French films subtitled in Finnish, which would have to be explained in English for a Spanish-speaking audience, we would like to list some of the problems that any translator has to cope with when subtitling.

3.1 Visual transfer

In the discussion of drama translation, semiotic complexity is often stressed: the communication is verbal, non-verbal, paralinguistic and cultural. In the discussion of subtitling, very often only the language is taken into consideration, as though the audiovisual message did not use interrelated visual and acoustic systems with spatial behavior, posture, position, gesture and other paralanguistic signs, as though the verbal and the visual were not connected, in either a complementary or a conflicting way. For someone watching a film, visual cues may be more important for comprehension than verbal ones. On the other hand, sometimes the film director may play with their differences (intentional gaps). Both production and reception always involve the selection of interpretation cues. From Goebbels to the Gulf War, we know that pictures are manipulated and they manipulate us. We know that pictures are meaningful, that the relationship between picture and spectator is built up from projection and identifica-

tion, that pictures represent reality in different ways, that there are no pictures without a tradition of looking at them. The spectator is very active in building up the meaning of what he/ she is watching. Notwithstanding the role of perception, memory, or the motivation of the picture, most studies of subtitling tend to ignore these complexities.

If it is thus easy to recognize one's limit in a foreign language, it is much more unusual to admit that we do not understand pictures, to know to what extent our interpretation is defective. The colors, setting and clothing worn all convey a non-articulated message which is more or less culturally anchored. Let us take, for example, *Jean de Florette* (Claude Berri 1986). The film shows the blind Delphine, who in the end reveals to César the tragedy of his life, then César's deaf-mute servant, and finally Jean de Florette himself, who was born with a humpback and of whom the village people speak as if his being a cripple has predetermined that he cannot be a successful farmer, the different games played within the village male community and expressing a mutual masculine conviviality, the ribbon Ugolin has sewn to his breast as a sign of the mortification caused by the love he felt for Manon who refused it. César Soubeyran - the uncle - burns the ribbon after Ugolin's suicide; an act symbolizing purification from the public disgrace caused by the suicide. And, finally, the weight and mystery of water, the importance of which in the barren and arid Provence is displayed throughout the narration by the importance of the wells and the rain which is expected and awaited, and which then finally falls.

How does the non-native spectator perceive all such signs? To what extent does he feel that he cannot grasp them? In subtitling, there are no "translator's notes" on the screen. We consider it to be an impoverishment to limit the analysis of audiovisual messages solely to subtitles (which we call micro-analysis), since many cultural and socio-symbolic signs are intertwined with the visual (in *Jean de Florette*, Papet the patriarch, Jean the dreamer and Ugolin the simple man are kinds of ethno-types). The emotions, the justification of certain forms of behavior, and the stereotyped attitudes are often conveyed nonverbally, but these factors are not necessarily interpreted in the same way in all cultures. And yet in this case we are not dealing with exotic audiovisual messages such as those from Japan, India, Brazil or Egypt, which of course even more clearly display intercultural differences.

3.2 Paralinguistic and linguistic transfers

What has been said of the visual message could also be said of the sound track: the usual view is more one of the addition of sound to the picture than a deep consideration of their interplay. The meaning of silence, the interactive function of prosody and fluency, the role of foreign accents and ways of playing with voices are not of secondary importance. They allow for allusion, for parody as in Godard's *Pierrot le fou* or *Une femme est une femme*, in Giovanni's *Le*

Rapace (1968), relying upon stereotypes of Spanish to categorize different types of people, in Melville's *Le Cercle rouge*, Deray's *Les Bois noirs* (1989) etc.

By linguistic transfer, we mean here forms and uses of language with a more or less strong socio-cultural impact or connotation. For example sociolects, dialects, collocations, language games, terms of address, linguistic politeness, verbal humor, literary and political allusions, as found in Beineix's *37_C le matin* (1986), Pinoteau's *l'Etudiante* (1988), Pialat's *Loulou* - strongly marked by slang, ellipsis, dislocation or non-canonical word order, original thematic structure, etc.

The logic of international audiovisual communication (I), the specific type of discourse occurring in subtitles (II), and the processes of visual transfer along with paralinguistic and linguistic transfer do not make subtitles a very simple genre.

In conclusion, I want to stress three main characteristics of subtitling and two potential lines of research.

1) As with other forms of translation, the translator has to choose certain strategies so that the message conveyed fulfils certain social, moral, didactic, aesthetic and linguistic functions which go beyond the translator himself as an individual.

2) Subtitling is always and simultaneously constrained by two factors: firstly, by the demands of coherence (to make comprehensible a content which itself is intertwined with the visual); and secondly, by the need to appeal to and capture the senses, i.e. hearing, reading and to catch the spectator's attention.

3) The subtitles are constantly juxtaposed with the original - the oral discourse. This is rare with other forms of translation, except for interpretation and bilingual publication. This co-presence of two codes and two languages will hopefully make us more tolerant towards multilingualism, if not multiculturalism.

4) The technological development means not only satellites, cable, high definition TV etc. but also digital pictures, virtual imaging, overcoming the differences between reality and reflection/ resemblance and questioning the concept of probability. What, then, will be the function of language?

5) Language acquisition through viewing subtitled foreign programmes/ films has not yet been deeply studied. In a multilingual Europe in search of an identity, it might be worth looking at the media as a stimulating way of learning not only the languages, but also the cultures of our neighbors.

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