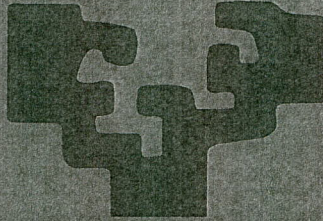


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**UNIVERSIDAD DEL PAIS VASCO
EUSKAL HERRIKO UNIBERTSITATEA**

**DEPARTAMENTO DE FILOLOGIA INGLESA Y ALEMANA
INGLES ETA ALEMANIAR FILOLOGI SAILA**

TRANSVASES CULTURALES:

LITERATURA

CINE

TRADUCCIÓN

**Eds.: Federico Eguíluz
Raquel Merino
Vickie Olsen
Éterio Pajares**

Edita: FACULTAD DE FILOLOGIA
Dpto. Filología Inglesa y Alemana
Imprime: EVAGRAF, S. Coop. Ltda.
Alibarra, 64 - Vitoria
D. L. VI - 139 - 1994
I.S.B.N. - 84-604-9520-5
Vitoria-Gasteiz 1994

**MEDIA TRANSLATION AND LESSER-USED LANGUAGES:
IMPLICATIONS OF SUBTITLES FOR IRISH LANGUAGE
BROADCASTING**

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The title of this paper may perhaps suggest that the subject matter is very specific and relates only to the particular case of Irish language broadcasting. By way of clarification, however, it should be pointed out at the outset that by using the example of broadcasting policy in relation to this particular lesser-used language more general points can be made which may well be of relevance in other linguistic environments. The paper will look briefly at recent developments in European media translation, in particular subtitling, drawing attention to the fact that the technology of translation rather than the theory or philosophy of translation and communication has latterly been the main focus of attention. It will also pinpoint some potentially negative implications for lesser-used languages which may result from the recent increase in interest in overcoming language barriers within Europe.

Without a doubt, dubbing and subtitling are the two main techniques of media translation which are currently being actively promoted by both the European Community and the European Broadcasting Union. Increased interest in these techniques during the 1980s was largely due to two significant developments, one of which is technical, while the other is political. The technical development relates to the new broadcasting potential offered by satellite technology which makes it technically possible for programmes to be beamed to larger audiences than ever before. The political development relates to the rapid expansion and economic growth of the EC and has given rise to the idea that the Community should foster and develop its own, strong, audiovisual industry. Clearly such a development is frustrated to an extent by the linguistic diversity of its own member states.

According to Luykens (1992) the total population of the Community in the 1990s "represents an audiovisual market potential of about thirty per cent more television viewers and some twenty per cent more television households than North America. But this European market is fragmented into nine linguistic regions, sixteen at the level of the Council of Europe, and including Central and Eastern European countries, some thirty different languages".

The linguistic difficulties facing the European audiovisual industry suggested above appear all the more acute if one considers the fact that the author failed to include minority or lesser-used languages in his deliberations. This should be viewed as a serious oversight.

Prof G Wedell, Director of the European Institute of the Media, in his introduction to "Overcoming Language Barriers in Television" identifies three objectives which need to be achieved in the European context:

1. "a more positive approach to the less costly forms of language transfer, such as subtitling, voice-over and narration techniques, particularly in the larger "dubbing countries", as well as within programme schedules and single programmes themselves;
2. recognition of the various European languages other than English as source languages of audiovisual works in Europe, with special regard to the smaller less widely used European languages and the increasing use of "pivot languages" (*Schalt Sprachen*) for transfer from one minority language to another; and
3. a gradual shift of audiovisual language transfer from a "post-production" service to a "pre-production" activity facilitating the multilingual production and exhibition of cinema films and television programmes on a European as well as on a global scale."(ibid)

If we consider Prof Wedell's first point, it is clear that in the short term, at least, the future belongs to subtitling. There are many reasons why this should be so. A subtitled version is, by and large, much cheaper and quicker to produce than a dubbed one. Indeed, it is said that subtitles can frequently prove to be up to ten times cheaper than dubbing and while many will be surprised to hear that it can take up to one working week (i.e. 40 hrs) to subtitle a one hour television programme, at least only one person need be involved in the process so it is still generally much quicker than dubbing. Consequently, it is likely that the larger, more wealthy countries traditionally considered "dubbing countries" e.g. France, Spain, Germany, Italy, Austria etc will gradually wean their viewers over to more and more subtitled programmes possibly with incentives from the Community.

Prof Wedell's second point attaches special importance to "smaller less widely used European languages" and this is reflected in the EC's current range of MEDIA funding programmes, especially BABEL. Any interest in lesser-used languages is generally welcomed unequivocally by their speakers who at times must feel, at best, ignored and, at worst, beleaguered. It is certainly true that subtitles make it possible for a programme made in a lesser-used language to reach a much wider audience. They also have various advantages over dubbing other than the already mentioned cost/time factor. For example, subtitles allow viewers to enjoy the original soundtrack, are ideal for those with hearing difficulties and can often help to improve reading ability and language proficiency.

On the other hand, the physical presence of subtitles on screen interferes with the integrity of each carefully framed shot and can easily spoil composi-

tion. They have the effect of distracting the viewer from other on-screen information and if badly prepared and used across cuts or exposed for over-long or short durations can be irritating in the extreme. Needless to say, dyslexics and illiterates are unenthusiastic about them as indeed are those viewers, mainly women, who like to do something else while watching TV i.e. knit or iron clothes! Nevertheless generally speaking, subtitles tend to be increasingly well received in EC countries.

At this point, however, it is important to consider the specific implications for minority or lesser-used languages if subtitle use were to be increased substantially. Let us look at the case of Irish language broadcasting in Ireland. First, some background information. Irish or "An Ghaeilge" is the first official language of the state, Eire or the Republic of Ireland. Yet unspecific census information from 1986 reveals that only 31.1%, i.e. approximately 1 million of the total population claim to be Irish speakers. In this context "Irish speaker" does not necessarily denote a native speaker as respondents who claimed either to read and speak Irish alone or to read and speak Irish and English were included in this category. However, O hEithir (1990) in an unpublished report commissioned by Bord na Gaeilge suggested that the truth of the matter might well be that there are only 10,000 native speakers of Irish left in the country.

The national broadcasting station RTE has in recent years served native Irish speakers and those others with an active knowledge of and interest in the language quite poorly. Things have improved somewhat recently and in 1993 RTE1 and Network 2 (the two national channels) will broadcast 200-225 hours of programmes in Irish, i.e. about 4-5 hours per week. One argument for not broadcasting more in the "first language" is the small potential audience. But RTE's current affairs programme in Irish "Cúrsaí" regularly attracts 70,000-100,000 viewers, while the new Irish soap opera pilot "Ros na Rún" held a loyal following of approx. 300,000 through its six episodes and "Cead isteach" in 1992 drew audiences of up to 577,680.

Meanwhile our neighbours in Wales at S4C have developed from 350-375 hours per annum when established in 1982 to an impressive 1,600 hours per annum, i.e. 30 hours per week in 1992. In Scotland where Gaidhlig broadcasting is on the increase, Scottish TV/Grampian broadcast 350-375 hours per annum, 25% of which will go out at peak times in 1993. As a result of a recent Irish government decision following years of active campaigning by Irish speakers, an Irish language television service Teilifís na Gaeilge is to be up and running by the end of 1994.

It is likely that many of the programmes first broadcast in Irish on Teilifís na Gaeilge will subsequently be bought and rebroadcast by RTE with subtitles. Since these programmes will already have been shown without titles, this is not likely to pose any threat to Irish language broadcasting per se. There is talk, however, of the TnG also resorting to the use of English subtitles on many of its

programmes so as to broaden its audience base. (This has been the trend in Scotland, where the majority of programmes broadcast by Scottish TV/Grampian are subtitled). While the motivation is obvious and the temptation strong, such a decision could have serious implications for the impact of Irish language broadcasting on both native and non-native Irish speakers. It would appear that decisions about the use of subtitles in cases such as this are often made exclusively on the basis of economic considerations, e.g. potential for audience expansion etc.

It could, however, be argued that such matters should be looked at in a broader context. A comprehensive theory of communication which includes media translation needs to be elaborated and broadcasters, translators, media critics and language planners need to sit down and decide not just that they will broadcast more in a particular lesser-used language, but also work out why they wish to do so. A clear set of aims and objectives should be established which would clarify the broadcasting objectives of those involved in minority language broadcasting and these aims and objectives should inform the skilled translation work of the subtitlers who then mediate between the two languages.

If such an approach is not adopted, there is a real danger that subtitlers with their various linguistic, cultural and technical skills will be seen simply as part of a purely technical solution to the problem of broadcasting across language barriers and the possible detrimental effects of, for example, English language subtitles on Irish language native speaker competence might well go unnoticed. What is being suggested here is that it must be made clear to the subtitler which sector of Irish society is viewed as the primary audience of any particular programme broadcast in the Irish language.

Hatim and Mason (1991) have this to say on the general question of the purpose of a translation:

Once again, we must place the act of translating within a social context. Since total re-creation of any language transaction is impossible, translations will always be subject to a conflict of interests as to what are the communicative priorities, a conflict which they resolve at best they can. It follows from this that in assessing translations, the first thing to consider is the translator's own purpose, so that the performance can be judged against objectives. In sum, it should be possible to arrive at some statement... (as to) what can be achieved and then to discuss results in terms of what the translator is aiming at, and for what kind of reader: do the results match up to the stated aims?

This quotation refers primarily to translators of the written word but applies equally to the media translator. Over and above the physical constraints such as the limited number of characters which can be written on screen (approx 30-35 per line) or read in a certain number of seconds, the subtitler, as translator, faces

a multitude of translation dilemmas and decisions which can only be resolved in a consistent fashion if s/he knows what the “communicative priorities” are.

Central to the idea of “communicative priority” in translation theory is the function of the text. This has been consistently stressed by such translation scholars as Reiß and Vermeer (1984), whose “Skopostheorie” implies there is no single perfectly correct translation but rather a range of possibilities depending on the prescribed function. Unfortunately until recently, many translation theoreticians made little attempt to accommodate dubbing and subtitling specifically in their considerations while many of those concerned with communications and broadcasting continued to view media translation as simply another technical problem for computers to solve with a little help from a linguist. (The lack of interface between those involved in translation theory and those engaged in practical aspects of media translation was striking but there are indications that things are changing for the better now that universities in Copenhagen, Dublin, Leuven, Lille, Strasbourg and Turkey, amongst others, are becoming actively involved in media translation studies).

Returning to the notions of “communicative priority” and “function” it seems that there are at least three different functions which broadcasting in a lesser-used language might serve, each of which implies a different approach to the formulation and presentation of subtitles:

- i. language maintenance, language planning
- ii. language revival, promotion
- iii. fulfilment of broadcasting obligation while attracting as large an audience as possible

If the priority is one of language maintenance and planning, then it is clear that one primary function of the programme must be to serve native speakers and consolidate and develop their linguistic competence. In such a case, subtitles are a secondary consideration which if “burnt-on” or “open”, i.e. visible to all, would undermine the monolingual relationship between broadcaster and viewer. If subtitles are visible, they will be read and the stronger language will encroach further into the already restricted lesser-used language environment. In such a case, “closed” or “Teletext” subtitles which can be accessed by means of an electronic decoder are by far the best option. However, in Ireland at present only 24% of television sets can cope with such technology so this preferred solution is problematic in the short term.

Perhaps, on the other hand, the number of native speakers left is not considered enough to guarantee the survival of the language. (This is the case with Gaidhlig and remains a real possibility in the case of Irish). In such a case subtitles might be requested with the intention that they should function as part of a strategy for language revival and/or promotion. In Ireland this would mean that the English subtitles would be aimed primarily at Anglophones who at least

learnt Irish at school and still have a passive knowledge of the language which might be reactivated through exposure to programmes in Irish with English subtitles. This audience is so large that it would be unwise to use closed subtitles. But the use of open titles will, as already suggested, both irritate and undermine native speaker viewers. The translation approach to be used would ideally have a specific pedagogical function not found, for example, in English subtitles prepared for a German feature film. In other words, the subtitler would be likely to translate quite literally using what Newmark (1982) would call a "semantic approach". Such an approach would render the expression "ar muin na muice" as "on the pig's back", i.e. in a literal or transparent fashion rather than idiomatically or "communicatively" as "away on a hack".

The third possibility is that broadcasters have no particular agenda other than reaching as wide an audience as possible although the programme is in a lesser-used language. This would result in the adoption of what Newmark would call a "communicative approach" to the production of subtitles, i.e. attempting to produce the same effect in the target language. This is the method commonly used between major European languages, e.g. French, Spanish, English, German etc. Subtitles produced in this fashion would be as distasteful as "semantic" ones to native Irish speakers who do not require any type of English subtitles and would offer very little specific linguistic insight to those Anglophones with some, perhaps, rusty knowledge of Irish.

It is therefore misleading to suggest that subtitling is a relatively neutral activity which, if anything, offers only advantages in terms of wider audiences to programmes produced in lesser-used languages. Both dubbing and subtitling interfere fundamentally with the integrity of a programme which was not planned with subsequent translations in mind and the use of open or "burnt-on" subtitles, pending the widespread availability of Teletext technology, is likely to result in the further exposure of native speakers of lesser-used languages to the nearest more widely spoken language, almost certainly with negative consequences for the weaker linguistic community.

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