









## Module 10: Translation Today

### Lecture 37: Dubbing and Subtitling in Films

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-  Introduction
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**Introduction**

We have already seen how translation is part of our daily lives. This is true of our leisure activities too. For example, Hollywood films are very popular in India. All sorts of people, those who know and do not know English, go to theatres to watch these films. But the American accent that is used in Hollywood movies is difficult to follow for even those who are fluent in English. From a purely commercial angle, it is of immense benefit to the Hollywood producers if their films can be appreciated by a wider audience, for whom these films need to be translated or dubbed into an Indian language. So we have seen blockbusters like *Titanic*, *Jurassic Park*, *Spiderman* etc in Hindi, Tamil, or Telugu run to packed houses for weeks on end. The awkwardness or sometimes downright comical effect of listening to Spiderman in Hindi referring to his aunt May as ‘mausi’ does not deter the avid movie watcher in India.



What is going on here is translation at all levels – interlingual as well as intercultural. While interlingual transfer is possible in the case of translation of a film, the intercultural aspect is more problematic. For example, the language of Spiderman can be translated into Hindi, but the cultural milieu cannot be translated into India. So we have a strange case of translation which is oriented to the target language but not to target culture. The issues associated with this audiovisual translation are different from the ones we encounter in the case of written interlingual translation. What get translated are the dialogues of the film, which constitute only a part of the film as a whole. Like the translation of advertisements, the translation of films is also largely motivated by calculations of profit. Dubbing or subtitling is part of the commercial establishment of the film industry, and can only partly be seen as an art. This would make the translation, very much like that of advertisements, an activity that has to be successful in the commercial sense.

Dubbing and subtitling are the forms of translation that are associated with audiovisual media like films and television. Together they are also called screen translation which, according to Eithne O’Connell, is “currently the preferred term used for the translation of a wide variety of audiovisual texts displayed on one kind of screen or another” (*A Companion to Translation Studies*, 126).

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**Dubbing**

Dubbing is oral translation of dialogues or narration in one language into another language. Mona Baker and Brano Hochel term it as “one of a number of translation methods which make use of the acoustic channels in screen translation” (“Dubbing”, 74). It attempts to replace the original soundtrack while retaining the original phrasing and timing as closely as possible. There are two possible methods of oral translation, which are dubbing and revoicing. Revoicing is sometimes used to refer to all sorts of oral transfer in film, but it specifically means narration or commentary that does not have to keep time with the original. There is no attempt at lip synchronization (the matching of lip movements) either, unlike dubbing. In this sense, revoicing is more flexible than dubbing.

Dubbing and revoicing are the two types of translation of the oral text in audiovisual media.

Dubbing can take place at various levels. Dialogue can be dubbed in the same language. Sometimes the same dialogue will have to be recorded / dubbed in the studio again, if the film location was too noisy. It can also happen that the actor is not good with the language and cannot deliver the lines properly. Then an actor can make use of a dubbing artiste to render the lines. The dubbing artiste also has to be a good actor, at least in her voice, if she has to reproduce the drama of the original. She interprets/translates the emotional content of the film in her own terms. Although voice is a significant component of the totality of an actor's talent, dubbing artistes rarely get the attention they deserve. However, this cannot be thought of as translation in the same sense as dubbing into another language is.

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## Pros and cons of dubbing

Dubbing as a translation practice is more common in European countries like Germany, Italy and Spain. Baker and Hochel point out that there are advantages and disadvantages to this activity. The major drawback is that it is very expensive when compared to subtitling. It results in lack of authenticity as it replaces the original with a translated dialogue. This might appear very awkward as it retains the original settings and characters – for example, think of Spiderman conversing in Hindi. Besides, it will only have a few dubbing artistes to represent a wide array of original characters. It also deprives the audience of an opportunity to listen to the source language and get a feel for its cadence and tone. Baker is of the view that the standard of English is higher in countries that tend to have subtitles (Scandinavian countries) rather than those like Germany which tend to dub films.

But the most important problem facing the translator is the necessity to maintain some element of lip synchronization in the dubbed version. The translator will have to come up with similarly articulated words, a near impossibility if the languages are completely different, like English and Tamil. Lack of lip synchronization becomes obvious only in close-ups, but then a piece of dubbed dialogue can look very incongruous if there is no synchronization.

On the other hand, a dubbed film will be able to retain the full text of the dialogue, without having to edit it in any way. Subtitles can be confusing for the viewer who has to divide her attention between the visual and the subtitles that appear at the bottom of the screen. It is easier for even illiterate persons to follow the dialogue in the case of dubbed films. As Baker and Hochel point out, the advantages and disadvantages of dubbing are equally convincing, and there are a host of factors that leads a particular film industry to resort to either dubbing or subtitling. “These factors include cost, availability of relevant technology, standard of literacy, interest in foreign languages, degree of cultural openness, and the strength of the local film industry” (75). The reason why Hollywood films get dubbed into Hindi or Tamil despite the cost factor must be the huge market it is aiming at. It is interesting to note that not all Hollywood movies are dubbed – only those that have the elements of being crowd pullers have Hindi or Tamil versions. Movies like *Titanic*, *Spiderman* or *Jurassic Park* were known for their special effects rather than subtlety of characterization or dialogues. It is also noteworthy that movies get dubbed only into languages that can boast of a significantly huge viewership, like Hindi or Tamil and not Malayalam or Assamese.

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## Multiple Versions



Indian directors who have roots in different languages

have been known to make the same film in two different languages simultaneously. The Tamil director Mani Ratnam is an example. His recent film *Ravan* had a Hindi version and a Tamil version. Both had the same story, screenplay and dialogue but had different actors in the two versions. His film *Yuva* in Hindi was *Ayudha Ezhuthu* in Tamil and had a completely different set of actors. The Hindi film cannot be called the dubbed version of the Tamil and neither is it a completely original film. Since it is made by the same filmmaker and based on the same story and screenplay, it is difficult to pinpoint the original and the remake. One can only conjecture that the original is Tamil since Mani Ratnam's first language is Tamil.

Directors like Priyadarshan recreate Malayalam films in Hindi. Some of them are creations of other directors, while some are his own. Since India has overlapping linguistic territories, the same film can have one or more languages. It is common to have liberal usage of Punjabi in Hindi films. This is not translated as it is assumed that people who are fluent in Hindi would know a bit of Punjabi as well. This is also true of closely related linguistic communities like Tamil and Malayalam. However, when a character has to resort to a language that might not be popularly known, the film resorts to subtitles. The terrorist's speech in the Tamil film *Roja* had Tamil subtitles, because the speech was crucial to the understanding of the film and the director had to make sure that it was understood by the majority of viewers.

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**Subtitling**

Henrik Gottlieb defines subtitles as “transcriptions of film or TV dialogue presented simultaneously on the screen” (244). Subtitles (or captions, as they are also termed) can be of two types – they can be the translation of the text of the film/TV show or can be the written text of the oral one in the same language. The latter form of subtitles, ie English subtitles for English films/TV shows are quite common on TV channels in India. The reason for this perhaps could be that English is not the first language of Indians and many people might have difficulty in following the dialogue of the movie or the show. Channels like Star movies, HBO, Zee Studio and Star World in India have recently resorted to English subtitles for movies and other entertainment shows. However, channels like BBC in the UK also give viewers the choice to have English subtitles of programmes they are watching, from news bulletins to entertainment shows.



Translated subtitles are more common, however. In the case of film, they are translated from the final script of the film or as Gottlieb puts it, subtitlers work from “paper to paper” (245). This is then transferred to film by others. So subtitling is a two-stage process, of which translation is the first stage. However, he points out that the subtitler of TV shows and videotapes “usually work from videotape to disk, creating, editing, and time-cueing the subtitles on a PC-based workstation” (245). This means that the final product will not be on paper but on a disk that can be broadcast directly.

The subtitlers for Indian movies have an additional work which is that of translating songs into another language. This has to be done with extreme care as the effect can be unintentionally hilarious. Terms of endearment in Hindi or Urdu can be very awkward if translated literally, and what is sheer poetry can become ludicrous doggerel. It is also difficult to capture the poetic essence of the song without the accompanying melody. So if this is not done carefully, the translation / subtitles can backfire.

## Polysemiotic medium of film

Films and TV shows are polysemiotic, or make use of multiple channels to communicate with the viewer, unlike the monosemiotic medium of a book that is unillustrated.

Gottlieb identifies four channels that are generally used by film and television:

1. “The verbal auditory channel, including dialogue, background voices and sometimes lyrics
2. The non-verbal auditory channel, including music, natural sound and sound effects
3. The verbal visual channel, including superimposed titles and written signs on the screen
4. and the non-verbal visual channel including picture composition and flow” (245).

Multiple channels of communication are used by screen translators, especially subtitlers.

The translator of the film has to concentrate only on the third channel, which is of the verbal one. The viewer who is watching the film and also reading the subtitles, actually has a divided attention. Gottlieb observes that the reception of the film will be different, in that the film is also being read as opposed to just being seen. This process of reception and appreciation of a subtitled film is a matter that is now studied by psychologists.

When compared to other forms of screen translation like dubbing, commentary or voice-over, subtitling is disemiotic because it uses two channels – written text and speech. The other three are replacing oral text with another text and hence are monosemiotic (Gottlieb, 246). In translation, the subtitler’s focus is not just on the words and sentences of the text, but on its effect as a whole. Gottlieb points out: “This pragmatic dimension leaves the subtitler free to take certain linguistic liberties, bearing in mind that each subtitle must be phrased and cued as part of a larger polysemiotic whole aimed at unimpeded audience reception” (247). The most common way to use subtitles is to have about 2-3 sentences with 60-70 characters on screen at a particular point of time. So the subtitler usually condenses the speech. Sometimes the differences between the languages may also necessitate reduction.



## Types of Subtitling

Gottlieb divides subtitles on the basis of two factors, of language and technical process (247). On the basis of language, they can be divided into intralingual and interlingual. Intralingual subtitles or subtitles in the same language as the programme, are used either for hearing-impaired or for people who are learning a foreign language. Gottlieb describes this form of translation as vertical, as it is just putting down an oral text in writing. Interlingual transfer not only translates from one language to another, but also changes it from speech to writing. This can be called diagonal form of transfer as the change is from oral text in one language to written text in another language.

Subtitles can be divided in two on the basis of language and the technical process they follow.

On the basis of technical process, there are two types of subtitles – open and closed. Open subtitles are not optional and are generally part of the film or show. They can also be interlingual translations of the oral text, transmitted terrestrially and so are part of the television show. Closed subtitles are optional and can be controlled by the remote control of the television. One example would be the subtitles that go with programmes for the differently abled. They could also be interlingual translation that is transmitted through satellite and is available in different languages to different speech communities. These sort of closed subtitles are possible only in television shows, as the viewer in this context can select her options of viewing the show using the remote control.

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#### Conclusion

The translators of screen texts are literally and metaphorically invisible, as they are never acknowledged in the credits of a film. Translation studies specialists also have not considered them seriously. However, it can be seen that they are undertaking a complex translation process that, if not done carefully, can jeopardize a project that has crores of rupees invested in it. These translators are completely target-oriented and will have to know the target language and culture very well. This is more so because a film script consists almost entirely of everyday conversation that is non-literary. It will have slang and swear words, and expressions that are unique to a particular speech community. The songs in Indian movies pose challenges of a different sort. The screen translator, then, is faced with challenges that a literary translator is not. The translation that she provides has to capture the essence of the original. She has the freedom to take a few liberties with the original but not to a great extent. This very freedom calls for a wide-ranging knowledge of the target language with all its linguistic peculiarities and turns of expression. Only a translator with this sort of background can be creative in her use of the translator's freedom.

Screen translation deserves to be analyzed in depth by translation theorists.

Besides these aspects are the larger issues that lie behind dubbing and subtitling as forms of translation. As O'Connell points out, there are many questions that this field raises, which have to be examined in detail: "What commercial and political agendas underpin the selection and translation of material for the screen? What are the financial, cultural and linguistic implications of the expanding use of translated audiovisual material in individual countries and general?" (124). It is high time that dubbing, subtitling and other forms of screen translation were retrieved from the near anonymous state they are in now, and placed within the academic realm of translation studies.

#### Assignments

1. What are the main types of screen translation? Evaluate the respective merits and demerits of each.
2. Select a film or television show of your choice. Attempt dubbing and subtitling and analyze the difference in approach between the two.

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