Eliana Franco, Anna Matamala & Pilar Orero

VOICE-OVER TRANSLATION

An Overview

Peter Lang

This book presents the first study of voice-over from a wide approach, including not only academic issues but also a description of the practice of voice-over around the globe. The authors define the concept of voice-over in Film Studies and Translation Studies and clarify the relationship between voice-over and other audiovisual transfer modes. They also describe the translation process in voice-over both for production and postproduction, for fiction and non-fiction.

The book also features course models on voice-over which can be used as a source of inspiration by trainers willing to include this transfer mode in their courses. A global survey on voice-over in which both practitioners and academics express their opinions and a commented bibliography on voice-over complete this study. Each chapter includes exercises which both lecturers and students can find useful.

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PETER LANG
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To José, Xavi and Marcel

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Introduction

This book is aimed at providing comprehensive theoretical and practical information about an audiovisual translation mode which has not attracted the attention of many studies up to now: voice-over, or the translation voice that we hear on top of the translated voice. In our fast-moving technological society, multimedia formats have become extremely important and are being used more often than paper formats. The three most important features of multimedia in general (and of multimedia formats in particular) are their communication format, which is usually digital, their channels, which are audio and visual, and the simultaneity of presentation, which goes beyond the actual realm of multimedia, since we now have multiscreen and interactive products. The plethora of possibilities offered today by digital audiovisual communication makes writing comprehensively on one of the audiovisual translation modalities a risky exercise, since focus may be lost. Hence, special care has been taken and attention has been paid while preparing this book in an attempt to strike a balance between theory and practice. The book has been drafted from our experience in this field as practitioners, as trainers and as researchers. We have taken into consideration the process of translating for voice-over and its reception, the teaching of voice-over and potential topics for investigation. The book has been drafted to serve as a useful manual to students, but also as a point of departure for further research. While writing the book we never lost sight of the need for a comprehensive study of the modality, although we were aware of the difficulty of describing, studying, analysing and reflecting on something as multifaceted as voice-over. Our aim was to write, in as direct a way as possible, about the complex audiovisual translation modality of voice-over, while at the same time being extremely explicit with examples and exercises related to both practice and analysis, which are the basis of an academic manual. We truly hope that our efforts prove to be worthwhile for students, trainers and those who would like to conduct further research into any aspect of revoicing in audiovisual translation.

Chapter 1, *Voice-over from Film Studies to Translation Studies*, focuses on terminological issues and explains the confusion that has often surrounded a term borrowed from the well-established field of Film Studies and introduced into the more recent field of Translation Studies. After explaining the origins of the term *voice-over*, the chapter clarifies the relationship between voice-over and other audiovisual transfer modes and finally proposes a clear-cut definition.

Chapters 2 and 3, *Voice-over for postproduction (I): Typology and working conditions* and *Voice-over for postproduction (II): The translation proces*s respectively, deal with voice-over for postproduction, that is, the revoicing of an audiovisual product that has already been edited. After establishing a differentiation between fiction and non-fiction, professional aspects are explained and the characteristics of the source text in terms of speakers and script structure are elucidated. Subsequently, the specific features of the translation process are investigated pointing to the tight relationship between voice-over and the off-screen dubbing of commentaries.

Chapter 4, *Voice-over for production*, explains a completely different approach to voice-over, that is, the revoicing of an audiovisual product that has not yet been finished or completed. In this case, translators generally work without a script and sometimes they even act as journalists, creating totally adapted voice-overs or commentaries.

Chapter 5, *Training in voice-over*, describes two successful courses on voice-over at the MA in Audiovisual Translation at the *Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona*: one course is taught in a Barcelona-based programme (www.fti.uab.es/audiovisual) whilst the other course is taught online (www.fti.uab.es/onptav). The course structures as well as the exercises proposed can be used by trainers to devise courses dealing with this neglected, yet innovative, transfer mode.

Chapter 6, *Giving voice to practitioners and academics: a global survey on voice-over*, presents the results of a global survey on voice-over, in which actual practitioners express their opinions on different issues related to voice-over: this survey highlights the various practices and terminology used worldwide and also the need to systematize terms and concepts.

Finally, the book offers a commented bibliography on voice-over, which includes the most relevant academic contributions to this transfer mode.

The aim of this book is not only to offer an overview of the fascinating transfer mode of voice-over but also to provide some ideas for students and trainers. In some cases, it is important to have first-hand experience in order to understand fully the process of translation and the many issues related to this work practice. Voice-over translation offers wide and enriching opportunities to practise many issues related to other audiovisual translation modalities because it shares features with dubbing, subtitling, audio description, audio subtitling, etc. Since translation exercises are bound to language pairs, we have devised exercises taking some generic documentation as our point of departure. This documentation can then be adapted to any language combination. The book is highly practical and we hope to transmit the enthusiasm that we have for the subject matter to those who have not been captured by it yet.

Barcelona, 4 May 2009

Preface to second edition

Unlike writing airport bestsellers, writing academic books tend to be unglamorous and the idea of a second edition is always very detached from the author. Having said this, when we had the first the idea of writing a book on voice-over translation we knew our book would be popular. The second edition of this book goes to confirm our original belief, and it goes to show how voice-over is an interesting translation mode.

This new edition has tried to put right some mistakes found in the first edition, and it has also updated some information. In recent years voice-over has expanded greatly, and with the new and merging translation modalities more possibilities are available and unexplored. We could have included them in this book, but it would have been a new book, and we were only requested to produce a second edition. This leaves many research avenues open for investigation and future study. We would like to thank our editors Martina Räber and Benjamin Fröhlich from Peter Lang. Their encouragement and enthusiasm are most appreciated.

This second edition is dedicated again to José, Xavi and Marcel, and this time we add with gratitude and love.

1. Voice-Over from Film Studies to Translation Studies

1.1 The origins of the term *voice-over*

Voice-over is a term which originated in the area of Film Studies and is still used by filmmakers. From the very beginning of cinema in the late 1890s, silent movies relied on 'lecturers' hired by exhibitors to provide running commentaries for the audience of unbroken takes (films) or a string of several films (programmes). The main function of lecturers in fiction films was to fill the gap between "the viewers' inexperience at 'reading' narrative images" and "the filmmakers' lack of skill in conveying temporal, spatial, and narrative relationships" (Kozloff 1988: 23–24). In Japan, for example, the popularity of lecturers (or *benshi*) became enormous to the point of delaying the introduction of sound to cinema.[1] People would go to cinemas mostly to see their favourite *benshis* perform rather than to see the film stars. By 1912, lecturers had lost ground to intertitles and the motives were twofold. Firstly, films had moved from small halls to purpose-built cinemas, which increased the difficulties of voice projection. Secondly, film technique was developing fast, mainly as a result of the development of editing and new narrative strategies. Despite having lived through an era of glory, intertitles became obtrusive in film and, consequently, efforts were made to avoid them as much as possible. But apart from criticism, the importance of intertitling and lecturing is evidenced in the fact that they have continued to survive in the sound era.

The advent of sound in 1927 represented a sudden leap in the film's narrative pace, which did not exist with intertitles.[2] On the other hand, it also represented a limitation to filmmakers, whose new cameras with sound recording systems weighed too much to be carried around, and single microphones prevented actors to move freely. For these reasons, post-shooting voice-over narration became one of the most useful devices implemented to deal with the deficiencies of the early sound era. And thus, it replaced the lecturing of the silent era.

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[1] For more on the topic see also Dym 2003, Pujol and Orero 2007 and Standish 2005.

[2] However, it is true that films gained visual and aural depth, but these aspects also brought with them additional costs with dialogue specialists and sound engineers (Hayward 1996).

In his glossary of film terms Harrington defines voice-over as "any spoken language not seeming to come from images on the screen" (1973: 165). In other words, voice-over is defined as a narrative technique in which the voice of a faceless narrator is heard over different images and for different purposes. Compare, for example, the expository voice in a documentary about the life of animals and the accusing voice of the narrator towards one of the murder suspects in a thriller film. That is why it is common in film terminology to talk about *the voice-overs* of a documentary meaning, for example, all the speech sequences whose speakers cannot be seen. This concept is also reflected in three of the most popular reference works. *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines voice-over as "narration spoken by an unseen narrator in a film or a television programme; the unseen person providing the voice" (Brown 1993: 3596), whereas the Merriam Webster's online dictionary provides the following definition: "1a: the voice of an unseen narrator speaking (as in a motion picture or television commercial), 1b: the voice of a visible character (as in a motion picture) expressing unspoken thoughts".[3] The online encyclopedia Wikipedia defines *voice-over* as follows:

> The term voice-over refers to a production technique where a disembodied voice is broadcast live or pre-recorded in radio, television, film, theatre and/or presentation. The voice-over may be spoken by someone who also appears on-screen in other segments or it may be performed by a specialist voice actor. Voice-over is also commonly referred to as 'off camera' commentary.[4]

These definitions of the term voice-over, which originated in the field of Film Studies, have contributed to the various meanings of voice-over acquired within the field of Translation Studies. This chapter will attempt to shed light on the nature of voice-over by discussing both the move of voice-over from the field of Film Studies to the field of Translation Studies and the status of voice-over within Audiovisual Translation (AVT)

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[3] <http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/voice-over> [Retrieved on 30 May 2007].

[4] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voice-over> [Retrieved on 30 May 2007].

Studies in order to come to a definition which is believed to better express the characteristics of voice-over as an audiovisual translation mode and which will be adopted throughout the present book.

1.2 Voice-Over in Audiovisual Translation Studies

Within the field of Translation Studies, the boom of audiovisual translation came about in the 1980s. The term voice-over was then borrowed from Film Studies to become a mode of transfer in the new field, one in which the translating voice is heard on top of the translated voice. The coexistence of the same denomination for two different concepts in two different, yet still related, fields has caused some terminological confusion among audiovisual translation scholars, who have often shown a certain degree of difficulty when attempting to define the new mode and its features (Franco 2000b, 2001b, Orero 2009). Maybe because of the lack of understanding about this mode, lack of research interest has also prevailed.

The first article that explicitly mentions voice-over as a mode of transfer, and as a form of dubbing, was written by Fawcett and dates from 1983. The second work that refers to voice-over in the translation sense was Daly's article (1985) on simultaneous interpreting. In other words, voice-over is initially found in Translation Studies within the supposedly broader fields of dubbing and interpreting.

Even though the book edited by Luyken *et al.* (1991) is usually quoted in Translation Studies as the seminal work for audiovisual translation, its perspective relies mainly on Media Studies. In fact, it is only recently that voice-over has gained its own status in Translation Studies, but as Gambier and Suomela-Salmi (1994: 243) suggest, this is not a particular case for voice-over since

> 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 audio-visual 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.

Translation Studies is a new academic discipline and Translation Studies faculties date from the second part of the twentieth century. The discipline of Audiovisual Translation was created at a later stage and initially focused on the main transfer modes of dubbing and subtitling. It is only now, as AVT has become firmly established, that other transfer modes (other than dubbing and subtitling) that have received little or no attention by scholars so far can be studied in greater detail.

1.2.1 Research on Voice-Over

In the first systematic study of voice-over as a translation mode and of its frequent use in TV documentaries (Franco 2000b) figures were presented to illustrate the little amount of documented research devoted to the factual genre and to the voice-over mode, as opposed to other genres and modes of audiovisual transfer. The data were based on the second edition of the *Language Transfer and Audiovisual Communication Bibliography* gathered by Gambier (1997). By way of summary, the 1,241 entries revealed only 21 entries devoted to programmes regarded as belonging to the non-fictional genre, such as the documentary film (six entries), current affairs (only one entry), news (nine entries), panel discussions and/or political debates (four entries) and commercials (only one entry). Taking into account entries which explicitly mention discourse types and/or other audiovisual modes believed to be related to the factual genre, nine entries could be added to the list (seven entries under the subcategory *commentary* and two entries under the subcategory *narration*). Finally, concerning the voice-over translation mode, explicit reference was made in eleven entries only. Thus, the revised bibliography accounts for a total sum of 41 entries which refer explicitly to non-fiction, including multiple entries of two studies, which dealt with more than one topic.[5]

Six years later, at the MuTra Conference in Copenhagen, Orero (2006b) provided an updated version on the amount of research performed on voice-over translation as compared to the publications on subtitling and dubbing. The data came from three different online bibliographies, all of them established sources of information for audiovisual scholars: the John Benjamins *Translation Studies Bibliography* <http://www.benjamins.com/online/tsb>, the St. Jerome *Translation Studies Abstracts* and *Bibliography of Translation Studies* <http://www.stjerome.co.uk/tsaonline/index.php> and Javier Aixelà's *Bibliografia de Traducció i d'Interpretació* (BITRA), from the University of Alicante <http://cv1.cpd.ua.es/tra_int/usu/buscar.asp?idioma=va>.[6] The survey carried out in February 2006 yielded the following results:

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[5] This was the case with Pönniö's *Voice over, narration et commentaire* (1995) and with Luyken's *Overcoming Language Barriers in Television: Dubbing and Subtitling for the European Audience* (1991), which were counted three times each.

Table 1. Quantitative research data on audiovisual translation modes (February 2006)

translation mode	*AVT*	*Subtitling*	*Dubbing*	*Voice-over*
John Benjamins	84	206	132	24
St. Jerome	109	175	124	12
BITRA	953	277	239	12

Needless to say, the differences between the numbers of publications on voice-over and on dubbing and subtitling are striking. However, the data provided by the commented bibliography on voice-over in Chapter 7 of this book present a more optimistic landscape, starting already with the number of entries collected (72 in total).[7]

As for the qualitative aspect of the data presented in the bibliography, Table 2 below shows works on audiovisual translation published before/until and after February 2000 that focus either on a general audiovisual topic and/or an audiovisual translation mode other than voice-over but that do make a passing reference to voice-over, or specifically on the voice-over translation mode.

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[6] All URLs with no date of retrieval were last retrieved in February 2010.

[7] This number excludes publications by scholars of Film Studies which deal with voice-over as a narrative technique and, consequently, do not belong to the literature of audiovisual translation, such as Kozloff (1988). Such publications are found as bibliographical references of this book. On the other hand, the commented bibliography in Chapter 7 includes studies in print as well as in digital form. As far as topics are concerned, the bibliography includes both publications about other transfer modes that make reference to voice-over and publications that focus on voice-over as a transfer mode.

Table 2. Qualitative data on voice-over translation works before and after 2000

	Published before/until February 2000	*Published after February 2000*
Total amount	32	40
Passing reference to voice-over	22	17
Focus on the voice-over mode	10	23

As far as post-thesis works are concerned, the data in Table 2 reveal a decrease in the number of works that refer to voice-over in passing and a significant increase in the number of works that focus specifically on voice-over translation. This means that, whereas before February 2000 works that contained passing references to voice-over ranked first with 22 such works as opposed to 10 works that focused specifically on voice-over translation, from the year 2000 onwards works that refer in passing to voice-over counted 17 items, which indicates a decrease of five works, and works dealing specifically with the voice-over mode reached more than double the amount of works produced before the 2000 (23 items, which is an increase of 13 works).[8]

In terms of the amount of research developed annually within the 72 items of the bibliography, Table 3 below shows that, on a scale from one to ten, the years 1995, 1996, 1998, 2000 and 2004 were the most prolific. Regarding research done specifically about the voice-over mode, the year 2004 presents the highest number of works (i. e. five, or 50% of specific works during the year) whereas 2006 and 2007 present eight works altogether specifically on voice-over. May of 2008, when the bibliography was last updated, looks promising with one work already published and two forthcoming publications focusing on voice-over and another forthcoming contribution on a more general audiovisual topic.

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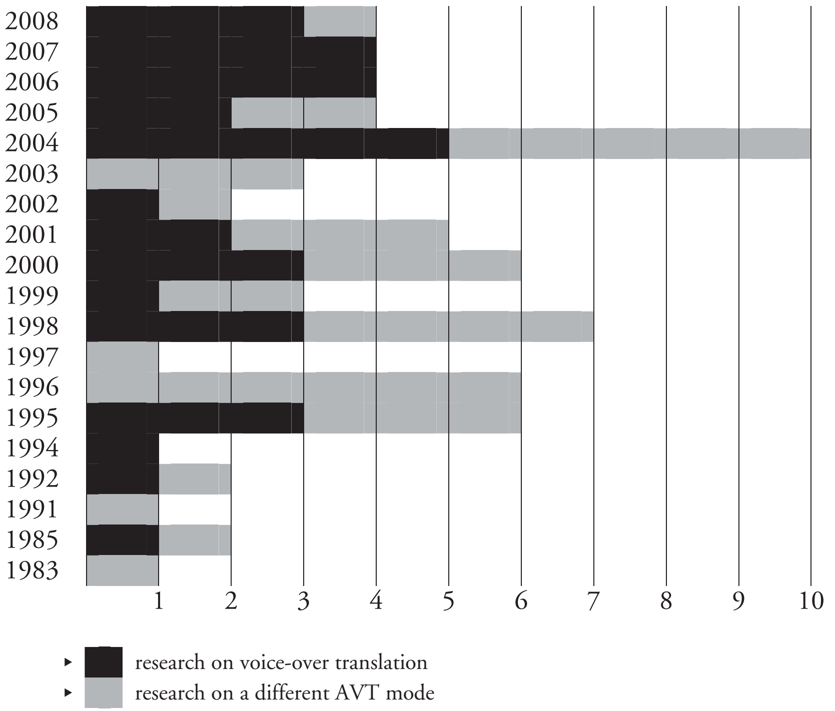
[8] These figures represent items collected until the beginning of June 2007 and updated in May 2008.

Table 3. Volume and focus of AVT research by year



- ▪ research on voice-over translation
- ▨ research on a different AVT mode
- 2008 indicates three works that are forthcoming and one work already made public

It may be concluded that the interest in voice-over translation has increased significantly and more rapidly from the year 2000 onwards. However, whether this interest reflects a better understanding, or even, a greater recognition of voice-over as an audiovisual mode of transfer remains to be seen. In the next section, specialized and non-specialized works from all areas of Film Studies, Media Studies and Translation Studies will be discussed focusing on the definitions and the characteristics of voice-over provided and discussed in these works. Contributions from the three fields are required to facilitate a better understanding of the present state of the art and to arrive at a more practical and less blurred definition of voice-over translation.