

Subtitling Norms for Television

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Volume 98

Subtitling Norms for Television. An exploration focussing on extralinguistic cultural references

by Jan Pedersen

Subtitling Norms for Television

An exploration focussing
on extralinguistic cultural references

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John Benjamins Publishing Company

Amsterdam / Philadelphia



The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences – Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Pedersen, Jan.

Subtitling norms for television : an exploration focussing on extralinguistic cultural references / Jan Pedersen.

p. cm. (Benjamins Translation Library, ISSN 0929-7316 ; v. 98)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Translating and interpreting. 2. Mass media and language. 3. Television programs--Titling. 4. Language and culture. 5. Discourse analysis. I. Title.

P306.2.P43

2011

418'.03791--dc23

2011032359

ISBN 978 90 272 2446 0 (Hb ; alk. paper)

ISBN 978 90 272 8392 4 (Eb)

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John Benjamins Publishing Co. · P.O. Box 36224 · 1020 ME Amsterdam · The Netherlands
John Benjamins North America · P.O. Box 27519 · Philadelphia PA 19118-0519 · USA

To subtitlers all over the world.

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Abbreviations

AVT	Audiovisual Translation
DR	Danmarks Radio
DTS	Descriptive Translation Studies
DTV	Digital Television
ECR	Extralinguistic Cultural Reference
IMDb	The Internet Movie Database
MTF	Master Template File
NRK	Norsk Rikskringkasting
n.y.	No year
OED	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i> (Internet version)
p.c.	Personal communication
SC	Source Culture
SDH	Subtitling for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
SL	Source Language
ST	Source Text
SVT	Sveriges Television
TC	Target Culture
TL	Target Language
TS	Translation Studies
TT	Target Text

Acknowledgement

The author would like to extend his gratitude to the Department of English at Stockholm University for its support.

Subtitling as audiovisual translation

If you spend any time in a non-Anglophone country that uses subtitling as its main mode of audiovisual translation (AVT), you will quickly become aware of how profuse a phenomenon it is. With the domination of the Anglophone entertainment industry, it means that a great deal of what you will encounter in cinemas and on television will be English-language films and TV programmes with subtitling in the local language. This means that most citizens of these countries spend a not inconsequential part of their day reading subtitles. For instance, Swedes watch an average of 2.5 hours of television a day (*Mediamätning i Skandinavien*), much of which is subtitled, whereas the reading of books and newspapers takes up only 20 minutes of their time (SOU 2002:228).¹ Subtitling is thus a very important factor in people's everyday lives and that strongly warrants academic research into the subject. Consequently, the subject has attracted serious attention from scholars in recent years. As examples of this, the dissertations by Sahlin (2001) and Neves (2005) on subtitling for the deaf and hard-of hearing and Schröter (2005), Georgakopoulou (2010) and Mattsson (2009) on interlingual subtitling could be mentioned, and we also have earlier academic works on the nature of subtitling, notably by Gottlieb (e.g. 1994, 1997), and Ivarsson and Carroll (1998). It is my sincere hope that the present exploration into the subject will add something to the accumulated knowledge in the field. Despite the upsurge in research into AVT that has taken place in the last couple of decades, there are still many areas of subtitling which remain unexplored. Particularly, no large-scale attempt has been made to descriptively explore the norms of subtitling of technical norms and culture-specific items.

This monograph hopes to shed some light on the emergence, the development and the complexities of subtitling norms. It does this by empirically exploring

1. This does not mean that they read subtitles for 2.5 hours, as many of the most popular TV programmes (e.g. news and game shows) tend to be in the local language, and subtitles are rarely continuous in foreign-language programming, as they, like all programming, include silent, or at least non-verbal, stretches. Nevertheless, subtitling is read substantially more than other media.

actual subtitles. The main data in the study comes from Scandinavia, an area that has a long and robust tradition of subtitling; however, data from other European countries will also be involved, and the aim is to provide as general a view of subtitling norms as possible. The goal of this monograph is thus to tease subtitling norms out into the open and describe them, and also to compare them to codified norms, which may not reflect the same reality. The focus of the present study, which is based on a dissertation by the present author (Pedersen 2007a), is on the most common type of subtitling, television subtitles, and all the source material is in English, as that is by far the most common source language for interlingual subtitling in non-Anglophone Europe. Furthermore, the material is selected from what is most frequently watched, as it was sampled during prime time. In other words, the study investigates mainstream AVT of mainstream TV.

The structure of this monograph is as follows. First, in this chapter, the nature of subtitles will be outlined and discussed, and the peculiarities of this medium will be described. Since this is an empirical and data-driven study, it is set within the descriptive translation studies paradigm (cf. Toury 1995), and the implications of this will be explained in Chapter 2. There, a more thorough theoretical discussion of the nature of norms in general and on subtitling in particular will also take place, and the theoretical framework will be laid down.

If a study like the present one aims at becoming valid, it has to investigate large quantities of data. This has been done by compiling a corpus of 100 Anglophone films and TV programmes and Swedish, Danish (+ some Norwegian) subtitled versions of said films and TV programmes. This corpus, which is called the Scandinavian Subtitles Corpus, is probably the largest of its kind, and it is excellent for comparing technical data quantitatively.² However, it is too large to enable the investigation of every single translation choice. To illustrate how Herculean that task would be, a 45-minute episode of *The West Wing* (1999) is used as the basis the entire *Text of Many Colours* project, which is a book-size undertaking of several hundred pages involving 16 researchers, including the present author. It would thus be vain to hope to submit the corpus of the present study, which consists of about 1,000,000 words to a similar scrutiny. Instead, what can be feasibly done is to extract a certain translation feature from the texts and to submit that to rigorous scrutiny.

The translation feature that has been chosen for close scrutiny here is what I call Extralinguistic Cultural References (or ECRs for short). These are references to people, places, customs, institutions, food etc. that are specific to a

2. The Scandinavian Subtitles Corpus, which will be used as the source of the examples in this book and for extracting technical norms and also for the application of the model developed in this book, is described in greater detail in Section 6.1.

certain culture, and which you may not know even if you know the language in question. The reason for choosing these cultural references as the focal point of this study is that they could be said to present a symptomatic translation problem. By investigating how ECRs are rendered in subtitles, one can learn a great deal about overall subtitling norms. ECR renderings disclose the subtitlers' attitude towards the source culture (SC) and also their predictions about their target culture (TC) readerships. ECRs can thus be used for uncovering subtitlers' initial norm (cf. Toury 1995: 56), as they reveal how they view foreignization and domestication issues. This is thus used as a way of probing into general subtitling behaviour and uncovering signs of general subtitling norms without having to analyse every other micro-level decision made. The model that has been developed for analysing the treatment of these cultural references is outlined in the pivotal Chapters 3, 4 and 5, and Chapter 6 sees the application of the model to the corpus and other material. Also, Chapter 6 will see an investigation into the technical norms of subtitling, such as expected reading speed, subtitle density and condensation rate.

The model which describes and explains the rendering of ECRs is tripartite. The first part contains definitions and delimitation issues of the concept; the second part consists of an exhaustive taxonomy of strategies for rendering ECR. The third part contains the parameters that influence the choice of strategy, based on the translation situation, the medium and the relation between the ECRs and the source text and the world outside the text. The model is data-driven and was created through the empirical work of analysing the corpus. It was thus created and developed to fit the patterns found in the data, rather than having the data fit a preconceived model. This monograph is thus interactively theoretical and empirical. The theoretical part, which is centred on the model for analysing the rendering of ECRs, was developed through the analysis of empirical data, and the model is applied on the data, which was used to create and adjust it. The theoretical part is thus solidly based on empirical data, and it can be re-used by other scholars for analysing similar data, or – with adjustments – any translation data one would wish to apply it to. Furthermore, the application of the model to the empirical data has not only proven that the model is effective, but also generated fairly comprehensive subtitling norms. This monograph should thus be of interest to anyone who wants to gain access to tools for translation analysis, or to learn more about norms of subtitling based on an empirically reliable and current source.

1.1 Audiovisual choice

There is no shortage of AVT choice in the multifaceted mediascape of today's world. Generally speaking, there are three main modes of AVT: dubbing, voice-over

and subtitling.³ Dubbing (or post-synchronization) replaces the source language (SL) soundtrack with a target language (TL) soundtrack. Voice-over keeps the SL soundtrack, but turns down the volume and superimposes a TL translation, usually carried out by a single narrator (as opposed to dubbing, which uses whole new cast of actors).⁴ Subtitling keeps the original soundtrack, and superimposes a translation on the visual image of the film or TV programme.

Traditionally, there has been a tendency to describe countries as either subtitling, dubbing or voice-over countries, according to their preferred mode of AVT. Traditional dubbing countries would then be the big language communities where German, French, Italian and Spanish are spoken. Traditional voice-over countries would be those which in the bad old days of the Cold War used to be known as Eastern Europe (i.e. geographically Eastern and central Europe) and subtitling countries would be all the other countries. This is, however, as the EU report prepared by Media Consulting Group (2007: 6) points out, a misleading oversimplification as the situation is much more complex than that. For one thing, many countries have different AVT policies according to medium. Hungary and Slovakia (which were part of the Eastern Bloc and should thus be voice-over countries) are for instance dubbing countries when it comes to the cinema, but subtitling countries when it comes to broadcasting (Media Consulting Group 2007: 70f). And when it comes to DVDs and video on demand, it is no longer a question of national, but rather individual choice.

Another reason why it is not necessarily fruitful to simplistically label countries as dubbing, subtitling or voice-over countries is because of the dynamics of the mediascape. For the cinema, there is evidence of a gradual and this far rather minor, yet important change taking place in dubbing countries, where subtitling is entering the market, particularly in big cities. For television, however, the situation is much more stable (Media Consulting Group 2007: 66ff). Apparently, the cineaste is more open to change his/her AVT preferences than the TV viewer.

Also, the labeling of countries gives a skewed view of the mediascape of that country, as regards volume of foreign-language imports. The U.K., for instance, is normally labeled a subtitling country (cf. e.g. Media Consulting Group 2007: 68), and in a sense, this is correct, as the very rare foreign-language products broadcast in Britain tend to be subtitled. However, to group the U.K. in the same category as countries like Norway, Greece and the Netherlands does not help the norm

3. For more information on this and other forms of audiovisual transfer, the reader is referred to Pedersen 2010b, on which much of this and Section 1.2 is based.

4. For more information about voice-over, the reader is referred to Pageon 2007.

analyst at all, as in the latter countries, most of what is aired is subtitled, whereas foreign-language programming is a very rare bird indeed in Britain. This means that the norm patterns for the U.K. and non-Anglophone countries are bound to be very different.

Which mode a country chooses as its main one depends on many factors. One is language policy: since dubbing and, to a slightly lesser degree voice-over, removes or hides the SL soundtrack, it boosts local language. Another factor that is usually mentioned is historical in nature and focuses on the origin of AVT in various countries. For instance, in 1930s Italy, the Fascist government forbade the use of any language other than Italian on the silver screen (Guardini 1998:91), making dubbing the only option. Nationalism is often claimed to have been a main force when dubbing was introduced in the big dubbing countries in Europe in the 1930s:

Dubbing was favoured in countries with very strong nationalistic currents where vehement defence of the national language was common. These voices had been heard for centuries in France and Spain and were even more forceful in the recently united countries of Germany and Italy. With the rise of Fascism in Italy and Spain and once the Nazis took power in Germany, legislation was introduced in these countries sanctioning dubbing and forbidding or limiting subtitling. In France of the 1930's only ten of the country's 4000 cinemas were permitted to show subtitled films. [...] These countries have stayed strongholds of dubbing until today.
(Ivarsson & Carroll 1998: 10–11)

The historical coincidence of the advent of the talkies and the instalment of Fascist or Nazi governments in three of the four main dubbing countries in Europe is thus used to explain why these countries use dubbing as their main form of AVT today.⁵ Equating dubbing with totalitarian governments is an oversimplification, however, as can be seen from the fact that the fourth main dubbing country, France, was never Fascist. Furthermore, Portugal, under the totalitarian leadership of Salazar, was (and remains) a subtitling country. Dubbing was, however, also introduced in some of these countries for reasons of illiteracy; there is no point in writing subtitles if many of your viewers cannot read them. Politics remains a strong motor in AVT choice in some countries, however. In Ukraine, for instance, the former government promoted Ukrainian subtitling of Russian-language films,

5. For more information on dubbing, the reader is referred to the works of Chaume 2004b or Zabalbeascoa 1996.

whereas the current one, which is more pro-Russian, in 2010 repealed the law requiring the translation of foreign-language films and TV programmes.⁶

Another very important factor is financial: the broadcasting industry is reluctant to spend much money on AVT. As Media Consulting Group points out, language transfer on television makes up only “0.6% of broadcaster turnover even though dubbed/subtitled works represent at least 50% of their program grid” (2007:42). From a production perspective, dubbing has the economic disadvantage of being about 15 times as expensive as subtitling, according to Luyken et al. (1991:105). Dries (1995:14) advises that Luyken et al.’s figures should not be over-emphasized, as they are based on a European average, and the cost of dubbing varies a great deal between countries. Also, even if Luyken et al.’s study might be the most comprehensive of its kind, it is somewhat dated by now. Dries’s own study indicates a more current difference, with dubbing being ten times as expensive as subtitling (1995:30) and Dries’ figures are supported by Media Consulting Group (2007:38). They, too, point out that the costs vary a great deal between countries: the pattern being that dubbing is more expensive in traditional subtitling countries such as the Scandinavian ones, and subtitling being more expensive in the main dubbing countries. Funnily enough, in Iceland, dubbing costs are only about twice the costs of those for subtitling so there is clearly a great deal of variation here. The reason for the difference in cost is that, apart from the translating and editing of the script, dubbing requires a whole new cast of dubbing actors. Voice-over could be described as a budget form of dubbing, as it does not involve a full cast of dubbing actors; one or two speakers can do the job. According to Luyken et al.’s somewhat dated figures, the cost of voice-over is about 1/7 of dubbing, but still twice as expensive as subtitling (1991:105). On the other hand, voice-over – unlike dubbing, but like subtitling – is an overt form of translation, as the original is audible in the background.

It is often said that the financial aspect dictates that dubbing only takes place in language communities consisting of more than circa 25 million people. This is true for most of Western Europe, where dubbing is the main mode of AVT in Germany (and Austria), France, Italy and Spain. Main subtitling countries are consequently the Nordic countries (Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland and Iceland), the Netherlands and Flemish-speaking Belgium, Ireland, Portugal, Greece and the countries that made up former Yugoslavia. By that rule, the U.K. should be a dubbing country, but that is not true, as it subtitles their rare

6. I owe the information about the AVT situation to Dr. Ganna Kryvenko of Kyiv National Linguistic University.

imports and subtitling is also used to promote the minority Celtic languages Welsh and Gaelic, and the same is true for the Republic of Ireland. Switzerland is mainly a dubbing country, since it tends to import dubbed versions into all of its major languages from Germany, Italy and France (even though subtitling is gaining ground in cinemas there, as in many other dubbing countries).⁷ Some countries that have two official languages, e.g. Finland, tend to have bilingual subtitles in cinemas with one subtitle line per language (e.g. Finnish on the first line and Swedish on the other). That is also the case in Belgium, even if one of the languages in the bilingual subtitles, French, is more closely associated with dubbing, and dubbing is also used for television in the French part of the country. However, the U.K. and Ireland are not the only exceptions to this rule, as the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary are all dubbing countries when it comes to television, even though they do not have populations of more than 25 million (Media Consulting Group 2007: 6).

Genre is also a factor that influences AVT choice. Children's programming is almost invariably dubbed in all countries, regardless of main AVT mode otherwise. Niche films for small audiences tend to be subtitled in dubbing countries as well. Furthermore, "non-national documentary films are screened with voice-over, or a mixture of voiceover and subtitling" (Media Consulting Group 2007: 47).

It is probable that of the factors deciding AVT choice today, the historical one is the most powerful. Once an AVT mode has been established in a language community, it is very hard to change it, at least for television. As Media Consulting Group points out: "broadcasting a subtitled work in countries with a dubbing tradition can lead to audience drops of about 30%" (2007: 10). There are fierce arguments both on the side of subtitling and on the side of dubbing (cf. Gottlieb 1997: 55ff, Díaz Cintas 1999; Koolstra et al. 2002; Tveit 2009 & Kilborn 1989, 1993). In the end, the choice probably boils down to what the TV viewers are used to, as AVT habits die hard. For the cinema, however, it has lately been easier to find cinemas showing subtitled films in Germany. In Scandinavia as in most subtitling countries, dubbing is traditionally exclusively found in films and TV programmes for pre-school children and cartoons and computer-animated feature films like *Shrek* (2001) or *Toy Story* (1995). However, animated films from Disney, Dream-Works and other animation studios are now released in both dubbed and subtitled versions in Scandinavia, when in 1990, only the dubbed versions were available. There are thus some signs that subtitling is gaining some ground in the cinema, even if not on television, just as Media Consulting claims (2007: 66ff).

7. I owe the information about the Swiss AVT situation to Dr. Alexander Künzli of Zürcher Hochschule für Angewandte Wissenschaften.

Before a television AVT mode becomes entrenched, however, it is possible for a country to reappraise its choice, which can be seen in some of the younger nations in Eastern Europe. Also, Gottlieb and Grigaravičiūtė (1999/2001:76) describes the following situation from TV's infancy in Denmark:

Before introducing subtitles in 1955 [...] DR, Danish national TV had its (few) foreign films translated by a film professor who read all the lines off-screen to a small, but enthusiastic Danish audience. However, this practice was cancelled after the (male) professor had done his best to render three French girls in an agitated discussion [...]. Then the director general of DR interfered, and since that day no feature films have been voiced-over on Danish TV.

Summing up, there are many factors that influence both national and individual choice of main AVT mode, the main ones being money, medium, politics, genre and tradition. The world today looks increasingly complex when it comes to AVT choice, and it is thus a simplification to talk about dubbing, subtitling and voice-over countries. As long as we are aware of this, we can still use the terms, however. Thus, whenever the terms 'dubbing country' or 'subtitling country' is used in this book, it is meant as shorthand for describing the traditional *main* mode of AVT for *most genres on television*, even if other forms of AVT are present and even if the situation may be quite complex as regards media and genre, etc.

1.2 The nature of subtitling

Subtitling is a form of extra-diegetic translation (cf. e.g. Genette 1988 or Cronin 2010), which means that it is extraneous to the narrative, but essential for the reader/viewer to understand said narrative. If you ask the man in the street, or rather the viewer on the couch, what subtitles are, you are likely to get an answer that sounds something like this: "Subtitles are lines at the bottom of the screen that display a translation of the dialogue." Even though this definition is easily accessible, it is clearly inadequate for the present purposes, and it can also be shown to be erroneous. First, a subtitle could be one single line, or it could be any number of lines. In theory, you could cover the whole screen with subtitles, even if that would be rather pointless. Normally a subtitle consists of one or two lines (referred to as a one-liner or a two-liner, respectively), but it could occasionally consist of three lines. Second, the lines need not be at the bottom of the screen. In Japan, for instance, subtitles are sometimes placed vertically on the side of the screen. That does not happen for European languages, but occasionally, subtitles may be placed in other positions than at the bottom of the screen, for instance if there is a risk of their blocking something important in the picture there. For instance, subtitles (or