Audiovisual translation

Aline Remael

Artesis University College

Audiovisual Translation (AVT), although a relative newcomer within the field of Translation Studies (TS), has moved from the field's periphery to its centre over the past two decades. The earliest form of AVT may have been translation of intertitles in silent films, but far greater needs for translation arose with the advent of 'talking movies' in the 1920s and the necessity of providing films with translations (so as to secure exports, especially for the US film industry). Various forms of translation were tried, even multiple language versions of one film, with subtitling and dubbing soon becoming the preferred modes. Selection between the two was determined by economic, ideological and pragmatic factors in the respective target countries. Initial research publications on AVT date from the mid-fifties and sixties, but a true research and publication boom did not occur until the early 1990s.

1. What translation modes does audiovisual translation encompass?

Subtitling* and dubbing are still commonly regarded as the two main AVT modes, with voiceover being the third (see Voiceover and dubbing*). However, the boom and proliferation of AV texts at the close of the 20th century led to a corresponding boom in AVT modes and eventually to increasingly interdisciplinary research. Developments that majorly impacted the AV landscape include the globalisation of AV distribution and production systems, the financial integration of TV broadcasting companies and the film industry, digitization (e.g., the advent of DVD technology, which allows for various translation modes on one disc), and related technological developments such as expansion of the Internet and proliferation of on-the-go gadgets like mobile phones, iPods and the like. Some of these developments and their theoretical capacities for supplying tailor-made products have led to the diversification of target audiences (and 'narrowcasting') and, most recently, to the capacity for users to actively participate in the translation of certain AV products (Gambier 2003). These newer forms of AVT are variants of older forms and/or new developments that share features with other, related types of translation. Newer variants include surtitling for the stage (Mateo 2007), subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing (SDH) (Neves 2009) and its subcategory of live subtitling with speech recognition, as well as intralingual subtitling that confronts linguistic variation within a language (Remael et al. 2008). Fansubbing and fandubbing are a form of User-Generated Translation (UGT)

in which Internet users subtitle or dub their favourite productions, thereby challenging commercial production modes (Nornes 2007). In fact, since 2009 YouTube has offered subtitling options to its users. Related to dubbing is audio description (AD) for the blind (Braun 2008), which translates essential visual information from an AV production into verbal narration between film dialogues, sometimes in combination with audio-subtitling (AST), an adapted aural version of subtitling. Video game localisation*, which mixes AV forms like dubbing or subtitling with features of localisation, could be considered a completely new genre. Needless to say, the proliferation of AV modes and technical developments is linked to the growing number of new environments (museums, opera houses, trains stations, etc.) where AVT is used.

2.   Unity in variation: An attempt at structuring the field and its research topic

Many forms of AVT, as other forms of translation or interpretation, still share the challenges of transposing text in one language into text in another language. However, audiovisual texts, unlike 'traditional' printed texts, typically use two types of signs and two different channels of communication. They are composed of audio-verbal signs (the words uttered), audio-nonverbal signs (all other sounds), visual-verbal signs (writing), and visual nonverbal signs (all other visual signs) (see Zabalbeascoa 2008: 24; and also e.g., Delabastita 1989). The different sign systems interact and together constitute the audiovisual text, a structure that is more complex than the simple summation of its parts. First, the relative importance of each system can vary. Second, even the verbal component of an AV text is never purely 'verbal': its shape is determined by the sign systems that surround it. Indeed, integration of the verbal component in a complex sign system meant to be watched, heard and sometimes read, often results in this component taking a hybrid form, i.e., one that is neither purely written nor purely spoken language. Moreover, as language varies according to use and genre, the language of AVT is never a monolithic entity (Freddi & Pavesi 2009: 32).

Both the expansion and increased specialization of AVT practice and research have led to various re-namings of the field and to different definitions of the practice and/or research topic(s). *Film translation* and *cinema translation* were among the first terms in use, but such terms soon failed to cover every mode of translation, especially as modes expanded to television and DVD, including different types of programmes (e.g., talkshows) that were not 'films' in the strict sense. *Screen translation* is more encompassing, and includes translations done for the plethora of screens being produced by today's audiovisual market. Yet this term encompasses localization*, which is not necessarily a form of AVT. Moreover, *Screen Translation* does not include surtitling for the stage, even though surtitling (or supertitling, the American term) forms part of a text that is composed of the aforementioned sign systems and communication channels. Another term, (*Multi)Media Translation* (Gambier & Gottlieb 2001), can include translations for the stage as well as

different forms of screen translation, and refers explicitly to the multitude of media and channels now used in global and local communication. The term *Multimedia Localisation* is a newcomer that appears occasionally today. The addition of SDH and AD to the research arena has led some researchers to define AVT as a form of *Media Accessibility*, thus stretching the concept of 'translation' to include 'translation' from sounds or images into words (Díaz Cintas et al. 2007). At the time of this writing, *Audiovisual Translation* is the most commonly used term in the field. This term refers to the different components involved in the type of text under scrutiny, and though it does not explicitly point to the interactive component of multimedia, it does not exclude it either.

The main challenge posed by this expansion is the increasing difficulty in delineating the AVT domain. Starting from the four constitutive features of AV(T) texts (cf. supra), Zabalbeascoa (2008: 29) proposes a way of mapping the object of study of AVT, placing

> AV texts, types of AV texts and parts of them [...] on a plane defined by the following coordinates: a cline that indicates the presence (amount and importance) of verbal communication in proportion to other semiotic forms of expression; [and] another cline for measuring the relative importance of sound in the audio channel weighed against visual signs.

The area closest to the centre of the two clines is where the most prototypical instances of the AV text must be situated (i.e., texts in which both audio channels and visual channels as well as verbal and non-verbal codes are active in producing meaning). As one moves away from the centre (in either direction), one communication channel and/or sign system gains prominence. This flexible schematic allows for all existing and future AV texts and their translations to be classified as more or less prototypical, and precludes omission of potentially interesting newcomers. Likewise, the schematic can incorporate or provide links to texts (e.g., cartoons) that have verbal and visual components but lack an audio channel (Kaindl & Oittinen 2008).
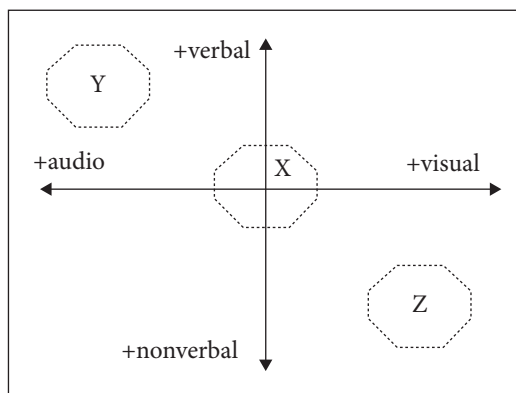
Zabalbeascoa (2008: 29)

3.   Audiovisual translation and Translation Studies

The multimodal or semiotic nature of AVT once led scholars to question if AVT was indeed a form of translation. The view of AVT as a form of 'constrained' translation, in which the other sign systems over-determine the translator's contribution, stimulated such considerations. Constraints include, in dubbing, the need for various forms of synchrony between text and image/sound; and, in subtitling, the need to compress, paraphrase and adapt speech to a hybrid form of writing. Today, however, the discussion may need to be revisited. The 21st century may well see the advent of the "audiovisual turn" in TS. Initially, TS limited itself to bible translation and literary translation. Only later did TL research extend to translation of other text types, although it remained focused on translation of verbal texts in one language into verbal texts in another language, or, in Jakobson's terms, interlingual translation or *translation proper* (Jakobson 1959/2000). Jakobson also coined intralingual translation (or *rewording*) and intersemiotic translation (or *transmutation*) to refer to related fields, but his very terminology relegated the terms to translation's periphery. The current inundation of text production modes and the ubiquity of image and/or sound in texts have made it virtually impossible to adhere to such a limited concept of translation. This also brings translation and other forms of text production closer together, as well as propelling aspects of AVT into other translation types or leading to incorporation of AVT modes (subtitling, subbing, AD, SDH, etc.) into other communication settings, such as website localisation.

It is difficult to predict if the trend towards expanding the concept of translation to encompass this diversification will prevail over the opposite trend, that of introducing new terms (such as *localization*, *technical communication* and *multimedia localisation* (cf. supra)) that aim to reduce translation to one link within a larger communication chain. This will depend not only on the decisions of scholars and university policies, but also on politico-economic developments that determine the translation market. Most forms of AVT have always involved some form of collaboration, rendering AV translators and their work dependent on other agents in the production process. New technical and socio-economic developments are enhancing that process, sometimes to the detriment of translators' status and working conditions, and a focus on quantity rather than quality.

4.   Research trends

The developments described in the previous sections pose interesting challenges for researchers and have produced a wealth of material. Numerous collections of articles offer good overviews of current research topics (see e.g., Díaz Cintas 2009; Gambier 2003, 2008; Lavaur & Serban 2008; Orero 2004; Remael & Neves 2007), and, as a quick Internet search will demonstrate, academic programs throughout Europe offer training and research in AVT.

Some scholars deplore the lack of an encompassing theory of AVT, yet one cannot help wondering if such a theory would even be useful. Although interdisciplinarity increasingly characterizes AVT research today, the frameworks within which much AVT research has been and is being conducted are those of Descriptive Translation Studies, Polysystem Theory, and, more recently, Functionalist Translation Studies (the last is particularly apt for the study of video game localization (O'Hagan 2009). Such studies stimulate partial descriptive theories (e.g., Zabalbeascoa 2008; Chaume 2004). Researchers continue to use (or re-use) research methods and concepts from various linguistic disciplines (including pragmatics, text linguistics, and cognitive linguistics), but combine them, depending on the particular research, with methods from literary studies, (experimental) psychology, film studies, statistics, reception studies, anthropology, history, didactics, etc. This is a result of the realisation that studying only the verbal component of AVT does not suffice and that AV media have inestimable social and ideological impact (witness e.g., the study of censorship in AVT) that merits further in-depth study. Research has gradually begun moving away from case studies and towards corpus-based approaches, thus facilitating more extensive research of the sign systems of the (digitized) AV text. Moreover, logging systems and eye-tracking offer new perspectives for quantitative research. More generally, digitization and Internet access facilitate research by increasing the availability of AV products and their components (e.g., scripts) and furthering the circulation of affordable AV(T) software for education, production, analysis and publishing. AVT is definitely here to stay and will, even by any other name, remain an interesting field for exploration.

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