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Adaptation in Audiovisual Translation

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Abstract

Audio-visual translation is the translation that accompanies audio-visual media. This typically comes in the form of dubbing (the replacement of the original audio track with a new version in another language) or subtitling (the addition of text in another language to accompany the original film). In both cases, the audience is exposed to the translation and to elements of the original version simultaneously. This factor naturally restricts the possibility of changes to the source material. Despite this limitation, audio-visual translation incorporates various types of alterations to the original source. The talk presents several adaptation strategies and examines the underlying reasons motivating such changes.

Key Considerations

Audio-visual translation: typically dubbing or subtitling.

Subtitling - written translation that accompanies original audio and video.

- The audience receives **simultaneous input in two languages** (+ the original visual).
- The translation should **match** (as much as possible) both **visual and auditory input** (in timing, length, and if possible, in intonation). A conflict at this point detracts from the viewing experience and draws the audience's attention to the mismatch of the captions (even more so if they understand the original language).

Dubbing - new audio track in another language, instead of audio track in original language.

- Audience receives **audio in one language** (+ the original visual).
- The translation should **match** (as much as possible) **the visual input** (in timing (judged by onscreen activity, editing cuts and lip movement) and intonation (judged by body language, expressions, lip movement and general atmosphere). A conflict at this point detracts from the viewing experience and draws the audience's attention to the mismatch.

In both cases,

- the translator is limited in length by the rhythm of the original film.
- the audience is exposed to elements of the original alongside the translation.

Several elements combine to limit the degree of divergence of translated version from the original, the freedom to adapt:

- **The role of a translator** (and expectations from the work) is to transfer the information in the original to the destination language.
- **Audience expectations** (to see a specific film/program, be entertained OR see a story).
- **Simultaneity with original visual** (and for subtitling, also auditory) input.

The Adaptation Cline

Despite this limitation, audio-visual translation incorporates various types of alterations to the original source. Alterations form a continuum from minor omissions and changes of wording to extensive character and plot changes (the stages below are only general illustrations).

I. Minor omissions and changes to wording

(e.g., removal of wording that isn't the main content, fillers, discourse markers, shortening lines of all speakers, but also removal or change of objectionable expressions; Quebec dub of The Simpsons removing a line referring to child suicide.)

Motivations: technical (limitations of length), localization, censorship

Potential problems: minor continuity (possibly affecting running dialogue lines), characterization

II. Change of textual elements (partially) motivated by language

(puns, language games, jokes, songs, objectionable expressions, see appendix)

Motivations: linguistic, localization, censorship

Potential problems: minor continuity (possibly affecting running dialogue lines: S. American dub of the Addams Family series changed Fester's name to Lucas, but retained jokes regarding the meaning of the name 'rot'.), characterization

III. Change of textual elements that affect characterisation /situation

(e.g., names, name dropping, quotes, choice of formality (insertion of honorary markers or 2nd person *tu/vous* not distinguished in the source and vice versa), choice of accent/dialect/register.

Motivations: technical (legal copyright), linguistic (some register/accent/dialect must be chosen; but specific choices have implications), localization, censorship

Potential problems: continuity (Die Hard German dub turns German terrorist team to international group, changing the leader from Hans to Jack Gruber; change ignored in following movies), characterization (pronouns and honorary terms alter the interpretation of relationships between characters; Avoidance also causes problems - Korean dub of Lost retained the nationality of two Korean characters, and failed to explain why they had difficulty communicating with the others in Korean.)

IV. Change to properties of character / situation that may require minor plot change

Motivations: cultural localization, censorship

Potential problems: continuity (French dub of *Lost* changed character nationality to German (from French original) via accent, but retained French references to her), characterization (The Italian dub of *The Nanny* turned Fran's grandmother to her aunt, thereby changing the interpretation of family relations; French dub of *Transformers* turned Starscream and Shrapnel female)

V. Extensive change to properties of character / situation that require changes to plot

Motivations: localization, censorship

Potential problems: continuity, characterization (e.g., The Italian dub of *The Nanny* turned the lead character and her family from Jewish to Italian Catholic >> forcing a change to recurrent plot lines and dialogue, most notably episodes in a synagogue and a Jewish wedding; Arabic dub of *The Simpsons*)

Some simple changes of limited scope may be motivated by technical reasons (length and rhythm limitations). Most changes stem from localization, which comes in various degrees and with various motivations: from necessary linguistic changes, cultural localization to keep the effect of the original (e.g., character nationality in *Lost* or *Die Hard*), cultural localization to 'protect' the audience and to minimize exposure to foreign elements (for social, cultural and/or political reasons). Some of these may be considered censorship (imposed by the translator, the standards of the company/industry, or by political powers).

Some final points for consideration:

- Some of the more extensive changes are only possible in dubbing, which completely removes the original sound.
- In many cases, the consequences of changes on plot and characterisation are not (fully) considered in doing an audiovisual translation adaptation.
- In an extended project (TV series), audiovisual translators have no control over continued development of the show, leading to increasing conflicts with extensive adaptations.
- Good sensitive translation / adaptation can produce a result that is equal to or better than the original. Unfortunately, this isn't typically the case.

Sample I (from Eddie Izzard's *Dressed to Kill*)

Yeah, 'cause they do say Britain and America
are two countries
separated by the Atlantic Ocean. And...

And it's true.

No, they say two languages... two countries
separated by a common language. [...]

And we do ...

pronounce things in a different way.

Like you say caterpillar and we say caterpillar. And, er...

You say a-LU-minum. We say alu-MIN-yium.

You say cen-TRI-fugal. We say centri-FU-gal.

You say leisure. We say "lizuriay".

You say bay-sil. We say bah-sil.

You say 'Erbs

and we say Herbs because there's a fucking H in it.

=====

Sample II (from *Blackadder Goes Forth*, ep.6)

Edmund: Do you mean "How did the war start?"

Baldrick: I heard that it started when a bloke called Archie Duke shot an ostrich 'cause he was hungry.

Edmund: I think you mean it started when the Archduke of Austro-Hungary got shot.

Baldrick: Nah, there was definitely an ostrich involved, sir.

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Sample III (from *The West Wing*, ep.2.3)

C.J.: Psychics at Cal Tech and the FERMI National Accelerator Lab are close to announcing what...

JOSH: Physicists! Theoretical physicists at Cal Tech...

C.J.: Not psychics?

JOSH (VO): No.

C.J.: I should jot that down.

JOSH: Please.

C.J. : I tell you if it was psychics I'd lead with it.