

Strategies Used in the Translation of Interlingual Subtitling

Farid Ghaemi

Islamic Azad University, Karaj Branch

Janin Benyamin

Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch

ABSTRACT: This study was an attempt to identify the interlingual strategies employed to translate English subtitles into Persian and to determine their frequency, as well. Contrary to many countries, subtitling is a new field in Iran. The study, a corpus-based, comparative, descriptive, non-judgmental analysis of an English-Persian parallel corpus, comprised English audio scripts of five movies of different genres, with Persian subtitles. The study's theoretical framework was based on Gottlieb's (1992) classification of subtitling translation strategies. The results indicated that all Gottlieb's proposed strategies were applicable to the corpus with some degree of variation of distribution among different film genres. The most frequently used strategy was "transfer" at 54.06%; the least frequently used strategies were "transcription" and "decimation" both at 0.81%. It was concluded that the film genre plays a crucial role in using different strategies.

Keywords: audiovisual translation (AVT), subtitle, translation strategy, interlingual (diagonal) subtitling, intralingual (vertical) subtitling.

Translation has always been a central part of communication. Consequently, Translation studies (TS), as a field of research, has developed over the last two decades during which screen translation has slowly emerged as a new area (O'Connell, 2007). Likewise, audiovisual translation (AVT) is a new field in TS. The most widespread forms of AVT are *Subtitling* and *Dubbing*. "Subtitling is visual, involving the superimposition of a written text onto the screen. Dubbing, on the other hand, is oral; it is one of a number of translation methods which makes use of the acoustic channel in screen translation" (Baker & Hochel, 1998, p.74). Díaz Cintas (2003) pointed out that the concept that has undergone greatest growth in translation is subtitling. It has many advantages; it is the quickest method and the most economical to implement.

Until quite recently, TS concentrated on difficulties associated with the translation of the written word. According to Ivarsson (2001), there was very little literature on subtitling for a long time. However, digital

technology has given us all kinds of modern equipment. According to Sánchez (2004), the advent of DVD has meant an increase in films and television programs with subtitles. In Gottlieb's (2001) terms, "these DVDs provide options for either vertical (same language) subtitling of use to the hearing impaired or diagonal (different language) subtitling" (p.124).

Dubbing has a long history in Iran; however, young people have recently favored subtitled films, and universities have begun to include it as a subject for study in their curricula. Subtitling is the focus of several academic conferences every year.

The most important problem regarding subtitling in Iran is the lack of responsible organizations and educated professional subtitlers at work. Furthermore, many DVDs are subtitled using special soft wares without human interference. Therefore, the present study attempts to contribute to the film industry in terms of emphasizing the need for educated and learned subtitlers to achieve the required improvement in the field. This kind of practice has never reached its high standard as long as it remains outside the realm of academic investigation and research. In addition to its pedagogical implications, the study pinpoints the strategies that have been of great use for previous translators. This study would also call the attention of decision-makers to include subtitling in academic translation training programs. Subtitling is one of the newly growing interests in Iran, and English films are presented in the original language with either English (intralingual) or Persian (interlingual) subtitling.

Review of the Related Literature

According to Baker (1998), "interest in translation is as old as human civilization" (p. 277). An increasing part of the language in the media worldwide is translated from English (Gottlieb, 2001). In technical terms, the translation of films is called language transfer. In other words, audiovisual language transfer denotes the process by which a film or television program is made comprehensible to a target audience who is unfamiliar with the original source language. There exist several forms of audiovisual language transfer. The main forms of language transfer are "subtitling" and "dubbing." "Subtitling is defined as supplementing the original voice soundtrack by adding written text on screen, and dubbing is replacing the original voice soundtrack with another voice in another language" (O'Connell, 2007, p. 169). Because of the larger costs of dubbing, subtitling has become a popular way of dealing with the language problem. In fact, "The role of subtitles is to facilitate access to audiovisual products in a foreign language" (Kapsaskis, 2008, p.42).

Many scholars have provided definitions for subtitles. The word *subtitling* is defined as the rendering of the verbal message in filmic media in a different language, in the shape of one or more lines of written text, which are presented on the screen in synch with the original verbal message (Gottlieb, 2004). In addition, subtitling is defined in Shuttleworth and Cowie (1997, p.161) as “the process of providing synchronized captions for film and television dialogue.” Traditionally, there existed two types of subtitles: *interlingual* subtitles, which imply transfer from a SL to a TL, and *intra lingual* subtitles, for which there is no change of language (Díaz Cintas, 2003).

According to Gottlieb, subtitling has been used since 1929, when the first talkies reached Europe (Baker, 1998). According to Sponholz (2003), subtitles evolved out of the intertitles, which were used as devices to convey the dialogue of the actors to the audience. According to Karamitoglou (2000), an “intertitle was a replacement shot for a part of a film that contained verbal information in the original language” (p.6). Sponholz (2003) states that texts were printed on cardboards and were later filmed and inserted between sequences of the film.

The invention of talking films in 1927 led to the gradual disappearance of intertitles, and the problem of language transfer took on new dimensions; as a result, dubbing was born. However, subtitling as a cheaper method of language transfer developed further. The technique of inserting subtitles onto the film was improved over the years.

All types of translation have specific constraints; doubtlessly, screen translation is not an exception. What makes subtitling different from other types of translation is that it involves both technical and contextual constraints. Gottlieb (1992) used a different terminology and explains that a subtitler is faced with formal (quantitative) and textual (qualitative) constraints. Textual constraints are those imposed on the subtitles by the visual context of the film, whereas formal constraints are the space factors (a maximum of 2 lines and 35 characters) and the time factor. According to Schwarz (2003), the main problem in subtitling is caused by the difference between the speed of the spoken language and the speed in reading; both require a reduction of the text.

According to Sponholz (2003), although interlingual subtitles are always perceived as a supplement to a film, they are the most cost-effective audiovisual language transfer mode. Moreover, there are some advantages for watching subtitled foreign language programs. First, watching subtitled programs fosters foreign language acquisition. Second, such programs improve reading skills. However, these benefits only apply if the subtitles meet the quality requirements. According to Gottlieb (2004), interlingual subtitling, having societal and language-political implications, is instrumental in improving reading skills, boosting foreign

language skills, facilitating easy and cheap international program exchange, and cementing the dominance of English.

Gottlieb's translation strategies for subtitling films are as follows:

1. Expansion is used when the original text requires an explanation because of some cultural nuance not retrievable in the target language.
2. Paraphrase is resorted to in cases where the phraseology of the original cannot be reconstructed in the same syntactic way in the target language.
3. Transfer refers to the strategy of translating the source text completely and accurately.
4. Imitation maintains the same forms, typically with names of people and places.
5. Transcription is used in those cases where a term is unusual even in the source text, for example, the use of a third language or nonsense language.
6. Dislocation is adopted when the original employs some sort of special effect, e.g., a silly song in a cartoon film where the translation of the effect is more important than the content.
7. Condensation would seem to be the typical strategy used, that is, the shortening of the text in the least obtrusive way possible.
8. Decimation is an extreme form of condensation where perhaps for reasons of discourse speed, even potentially important elements are omitted.
9. Deletion refers to the total elimination of parts of a text.
10. Resignation describes the strategy adopted when no translation solution can be found and meaning is inevitably lost.

Methodology

The study was a corpus-based analysis of the subtitling strategy conducted on a comparative, descriptive, non-judgmental procedure, which was carried out on an English-Persian parallel corpus of 932 frames. The corpus comprised 100 minutes of film dialogues in English and 100 minutes of Persian subtitles (200 minutes altogether), which was selected from any 20 minutes of each film for the purpose of randomization.

The corpus consisted of the English audio script of five English feature films, along with their Persian translation in the form of subtitles. The data were gathered by analyzing the Persian subtitles of the five following American films, which were among the different genres by different directors. The logic was to have a richer diversity of topics and content that would provide a larger variety of translation and subtitling strategies, in

turn. Furthermore, the quality of subtitles was excellent, and there existed very few mistakes compared to other English films with Persian subtitles available in the market. Here is the list of the films:

- 1) *The Young Victoria* directed in 2008 by Jean-Marc Vallee
- 2) *August Rush* directed in 2007 by Kirsten Sheridan
- 3) *The Grudge 2* directed in 2006 by Takashi Shimizu
- 4) *Big Fish* directed in 2004 by Tim Burton
- 5) *A Cinderella Story* directed in 2004 by Mark Rosman

To analyze the data, the researchers used the classification of interlingual subtitling strategies proposed by Gottlieb (1992) as the theoretical framework.

In addition, to obtain the required information, the researchers followed a three-step procedure: viewing the films, transcribing the English utterances of films and the Persian subtitles of each film, and, finally, determining the strategies used in subtitling according to the aforementioned framework. The basic unit of a film is a frame; consequently, the unit of analysis was considered a frame in this study. A frame is defined as a word or a stretch of words in the form of subtitle, which appeared for a length of time on the screen and disappeared before another frame appeared.

Results and Findings

After analyzing the data, descriptive tables were presented for each film under the study, which specified the frequency and percentage of the ten subtitling strategies. Table 1 indicates the frequency and percentage of different interlingual subtitling strategies in the five films. In addition, table 2 shows the total frequency and percentage of strategies made use of in the five films.

Table 1. *Frequency and Percentage of Different Interlingual Subtitling Strategies in the Five Films*

Strategies	Frequency & Percentage	The Young Victoria	August Rush	Big Fish	The Grudge 2	A Cinderella Story
Transfer	frequency	190	123	120	65	174
	percentage	72.52	45.06	53.57	47.10	50.29
Imitation	frequency	47	35	25	16	44
	percentage	17.94	12.82	11.16	11.59	12.72
Paraphrase	frequency	3	35	21	18	43
	percentage	1.15	12.82	9.38	13.05	12.43
Deletion	frequency	0	34	19	17	22
	percentage	0	12.45	8.48	12.32	6.36
Expansion	frequency	1	9	13	9	43
	percentage	0.38	3.30	5.80	6.52	12.43
Condensation	frequency	13	11	9	6	5
	percentage	4.96	4.03	4.02	4.35	1.44
Dislocation	frequency	1	10	6	3	10
	percentage	0.38	3.66	2.68	2.17	2.89
Resignation	frequency	4	10	5	0	4
	percentage	1.53	3.66	2.23	0	1.15
Transcription	frequency	1	5	3	1	0
	percentage	0.38	1.83	1.34	0.73	0
Decimation	frequency	2	1	3	3	1
	percentage	0.76	0.37	1.34	2.17	0.29

Table 2. *Frequency and Percentage of Strategies Used in the Five Films*

Type of Strategy	Total No.	Percentage
Transfer	672	54.06
Imitation	167	13.44
Paraphrase	120	9.65
Deletion	92	7.40
Expansion	75	6.03
Condensation	44	3.54
Dislocation	30	2.41
Resignation	23	1.85
Transcription	10	0.81
Decimation	10	0.81

The analysis of the data gathered in the present study revealed that the subtitlers of the films under the study have applied different strategies to

transfer the expressions of the original films. These strategies were as follows:

'Transfer' constituted the main part, i.e., 54.06% of the strategies in this study. Transfer conveyed the full expression, and it constituted the adequate rendering of neutral discourse; therefore, the researchers concluded that Iranian subtitlers did their best in transferring dialogues to Persian in the most understandable and natural way as possible.

Subsequently, 'Imitation' was used in 13.44% of the whole strategy instances. 'Imitation' constituted the identical expression, equivalent rendering of proper nouns, international greetings, etc. Although 'imitation' stood on the second rank, it did not have a fixed position in the hierarchy of the whole corpus, and its use was fully dependent on the dialogues between the actors and the intimacy among them, due to the use of this strategy in case of proper nouns and other words.

Moreover, 'Paraphrase' formed 9.65% of the translation strategies in this study. It indicated the altered expression and adequate rendering of non-verbal language-specific phenomena. Despite the similarities of concepts and ideas between English and Persian, the phraseology of these languages, in so many cases, needed to be reconstructed in order to create the same impression and understanding in the target viewer. 'Paraphrase' could be corresponded to a 'sense for sense' translation rather than a literal one. Using 'paraphrase,' the translator had tried to express the meaning of the speech using different words to achieve greater clarity. In some cases, this strategy was used together with other strategies like 'condensation' or 'expansion.'

Next, 'Deletion' formed 8.54% of the translation strategies; it was used to deal with non-verbal content, repetition, filler words and tag questions and, in some cases, swear words which were not common and/or appropriate in the target language or target culture. Although it might affect the semantic or stylistic content, such words could be omitted considering the norm of the target society. 'Deletion,' in the case of repetition and tag questions, was used to enhance the speaker's message conveyance. In other cases, 'deletion' was used in cases of filler words without achieving the same meaning. Subtitle is a written form of film dialogues, and speech occurs more rapidly than written form; therefore, it seemed likely that deletion is used quite largely as a subtitling strategy.

Furthermore, 'Expansion,' which accounted for 6.03% of the strategies, constituted the expanded expression and adequate rendering of culture-specific references. It occurred in cases, where due to a cultural gap, a smaller sequence of linguistic unit was expanded to a larger sequence to be fully understandable to a foreigner. In a sense, 'expansion' was considered as opposed to 'condensation.' In some cases, it was used to make implicit information in the original more explicitly through a kind of simplification.

As English and Persian languages belong to two different cultural backgrounds and religions, it seemed natural to subtitlers to be urged to use 'expansion' as the subtitling strategy to deliver the message of the film fully to the target audience.

In addition, 'Condensation' constituted 3.44% of the overall strategies used in this study. It consisted of the condensed expression and concise rendering of the normal speech. 'Condensation,' like 'deletion,' was regarded as the frequent strategy in subtitling due to the space and time limits and quick appearance and disappearance of frames and mass of the message needed to be delivered to the audience. However, no important elements were deleted or disregarded, but the condensed part could be easily understood by means of other channels, such as soundtrack and vision. Adopting 'condensation,' some of the redundancies were eliminated, and, thereby, coherence was enhanced through a shorter sentence. According to some translation scholars such as Schwarz (2002), 'condensation' is the important peculiarity of subtitling. This may lead all to expect a large number of condensations in the findings of the study; however, this low percentage (3.44%) can indicate a conflict between theory and practice. Some other strategies such as 'omission' and 'paraphrasing' were used to make the expressions condensed.

Next, 'Dislocation' formed 2.41% of the translation strategies in this study. It was used for different expressions and adjusted content of musical or visualized language-specific phenomena. Although there were no cases of song or cartoon in the corpus, the researchers encountered some cases where, due to cultural or social gaps, the effect of the dialogue uttered by the characters was more important than merely translating the uttered words. However, the number of dislocation traced in the corpus was considerably low, and subtitlers referred to paraphrasing the message rather than using 'dislocation' as a subtitling strategy in most cases.

Moreover, 'Resignation' constituted 1.85% of the translation strategies in this study. It was used in cases of differing expression or content of untranslatable elements. Each language has some forms to transfer the ideas and concepts to the members of its own society. However, because of some mismatches between the phraseology of languages and their message conveyance, there were cases in which a language could not convey a message. This was not because the target language did not have the tools to do so, but because the need was not felt in the language to construct a word for that particular situation. Therefore, the subtitler preferred to disregard the message altogether due to the lack of time and space as crucial factors of audiovisual translation.

Next, 'Transcription' formed only 0.81% of the translation strategies in this study. In cases of silly nicknames, foreign words, filler words, a person's pet words, or slips of the tongue, which were usually considered

nonsense in the source text, the subtitler resorted to the use of this strategy. Despite constituting a small portion of usage, transcription was not abandoned altogether from subtitling strategies.

Finally, 'Decimation' formed only 0.81% of the translation strategies used in this study. Moreover, 'Transcription' and 'decimation' could both be placed in an equal stage in this hierarchy. 'Decimation' was an extreme form of condensation where perhaps, for reasons of discourse speed, even potentially important elements were omitted. It constituted the abridged expression and the reduced content of fast speech of the same importance. However, it was distinguished from 'deletion' or 'condensation' because the cuts in 'decimation' resulted in a loss of both semantic and stylistic content, while the same condition did not occur in the case of 'condensation' or 'deletion.' In addition to the constraints of speed and time imposed on audiovisual translation, subtitlers are deemed to transfer information as much as possible to enhance the quality of understanding.

Conclusion

The findings indicated that all Gottlieb's (1992) proposed strategies were used in the English-Persian subtitling of English feature films with some degree of variation in the distribution of strategies among different film genres. Sometimes, more than one strategy was used to translate a stretch of words in a frame, and 'transfer,' with a distinguishably high rate of occurrence, was the most frequently used strategy in all five films. Moreover, 'paraphrase,' 'deletion,' 'imitation,' and 'expansion' were placed in stages 2-5 and 'condensation,' 'dislocation,' 'transcription,' 'decimation,' and 'resignation' were placed in stages 6-10 with a slight variation in *The Grudge 2*, *Big Fish*, and *A Cinderella Story*. The situation in the two other films, namely *The Young Victoria* and *August Rush* was slightly different. In *August Rush*, 'transfer,' 'paraphrase,' 'imitation,' and 'deletion' constituted strategies 1-4. However, due to the frequent use of street talks and slang expressions in *August Rush*, compared to other films, 'condensation,' 'dislocation,' 'resignation,' 'expansion,' 'transcription,' and 'decimation' were used to convey the message completely.

In the final stage, the researchers concluded that film genre played a crucial role in the variation of the used strategy. This claim might be much clearer in case of *The Grudge 2* in which the number of frames with subtitles was much fewer compared to other films due to its theme. In the case of *August Rush* with music and street talks, the use of strategies to render the meaning to the target audience was much more frequent. In the case of *The Young Victoria*, the subtitler tried to transfer as much as possible by translating the dialogues completely and accurately.

To conclude, the fast increase in new translational activities requires translators to learn new skills. It would be satisfactory to include appropriate training courses at universities including AVT training courses, in the same way as other areas of translation are taught. In short, the researchers hope the findings of the present study be useful for those interested in the topic, professionals, and those planning to start a career in AVT translation, especially subtitling. The researchers humbly call the attention of decision makers to include subtitling in academic translator training programs in Iran.

References

- Baker, M. (Ed.). (1998). *Routledge encyclopedia of translation studies*. London: Routledge.
- Baker, M., & Hochel, B. (1998). Dubbing. In M. Baker (Ed.), *Routledge encyclopedia of translation studies* (p.74). London: Routledge.
- Díaz Cintas J. (2003). Audiovisual translation in the third millennium. In G. Anderman & M. Rogers (Eds.), *Translation today: Trends and perspectives* (pp.192-204). Sydney: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Gottlieb, H. (1992). Subtitling: A new university discipline. In C. Dollerup, et al. (Eds.), *Teaching translation and interpreting* (pp. 161-70). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Gottlieb, H. (2001). Anglicism and TV subtitling in an anglicized world. In Y. Gambier & H. Gottlieb (Eds.), *Multimedia translation: concepts, practices, and research* (pp.249-258). Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Gottlieb, H. (2004). Language-political implications of subtitling. In P. Orero (Ed.), *Topics in audiovisual translation* (pp.83–100). Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Ivarsson, J. (2001). Translating medical texts for the media. In *Bibliography of subtitling and related subjects*. Retrieved October 14, 2009, from <http://www.transedit.se/bibliography.html>
- Karamitroglou, F. (2000). *Towards a methodology for the investigation of norms in audiovisual translation: The choice between subtitling and revoicing in Greece*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Kapsaskis, D. (2008). New voices in translation studies. Special conference issue, *With/out theory: The role of theory in translation studies research*. Retrieved October 14, 2009, from http://www.iatis.org/newvoices/issues/2008/kapsaskis_paper_2008.pdf
- O'Connell, E. (2007). Screen Translation. In P. Kuhiwczak & K. Littau (Eds.), *A companion to translation studies* (pp.120-133). Toronto: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

- Sánchez, D. (2004). Subtitling methods and team-translation. In P. Orero (Ed.), *Topics in audiovisual translation* (pp.9-17). Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Schwarz, B. (2002). Translation in a confined space. *Translation Journal*. Retrieved March 6, 2007, from www accurapid.com/ journal/ 22subtitles.html
- Schwarz, B. (2003). Translation in a confined space: Film sub-titling with special reference to Dennis Potter's "Lipstick on Your Collar," Part 2. *Translation Journal*, 7. Retrieved October 21, 2009, from <http://accurapid.com/journal/23subtitles.htm>
- Sponholz, Ch. (2003). *Teaching audiovisual translation theoretical aspects, market requirements, university training and curriculum development*. Unpublished thesis, Retrieved October 12, 2008, from http://isg.urv.es/library/papers/thesis_Christine_Sponholz.doc
- Shuttleworth, M., & Cowie, M. (1997). *Dictionary of translation studies*. London: St. Jerome Publishing Company.

AUTHORS

Farid Ghaemi is an assistant professor of TEFL and the Dean of Faculty of Literature and Foreign Languages at Islamic Azad University, Karaj Branch. He has taught undergraduate and graduate courses for more than twenty years. He has published a number of books and articles related to Applied Linguistics. His main interests are Language Teaching, First Language Acquisition, and Second Language Acquisition Research. Email Address: fghaemi2004@yahoo.com.

Janin Benyamin received her MA degree from Islamic Azad University-Science and Research Branch in 2009. Her primary research interests are Applied Linguistics and Translation Studies.

Ghaemi and Benyamin