# The subtitled film: the art of restructuring the language

Mª. José González Rodríguez
Universidad de La Laguna

Mientras que una película doblada se ve y se escucha simultáneamente, la película subtitulada introduce un componente añadido de presión temporal: el acto de leer. De este modo, es de esperar que el espectador de una película subtitulada no sólo lea los subtítulos sino que además escuche la versión original y vea el resto.

El propósito de este trabajo es dar cuenta del papel destacado de los subtítulos a través de una caracterización de las rutinas básicas que se emplean en su preparación, junto con las convenciones relativas al uso del inglés en la subtitulación. En este sentido, los resultados nos permiten constatar en qué medida los subtítulos añaden significado a una película, y cómo en una película subtitulada el requerimiento de leer se convierte en un obstáculo que el espectador puede llegar a superar hasta el punto de fijar su atención en la experiencia básica de la película, dado que la dimensión temporal queda totalmente controlada.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Of importance to a wider understanding and deeper appreciation of the merits of foreign films, is the work of a small number of technicians whose subtitling techniques have been enjoyed by many but consciously, or unconsciously, appreciated by few. The term *subtitle* appeared for the first time on 5th April, 1912 in *Le cinéma* (Marleau 1982:272-73). Subtitles were firstly used in the silent film period for the texts which rendered the inaudible dialogue. With the coming of sound films, language became more of an obstacle to international film distribution and one way of solving this problem was by the technique of *dubbing* or *synchronization* (Mounin 1965; Fodor 1976), that is, making "phonetically dissimilar dialogue to appear visually similar while still preserving the semantic and stylistic parallel between the original and the dubbed lines" (Rowe 1960:116) . Gradually, as many films were dubbed, this made subtitling a not very

significant part of the film business and even though nowadays dubbing is the rule, many films continue to go subtitled in some countries, and many others are required to be subtitled as well (Marleau 1982:277).

Film subtitles are the translation of dialogue or written texts, placed in the bottom quarter of the picture. Since subtitles have inexorably to maintain synchronization with the dialogue so that precise beginning and end of each phrase can be marked off, and since the film has to be seen as a whole and absorbed as a whole, to permit the insertion of a title wherever necessary is a tricky business. In the first place, because it is involved a comprehensive knowledge of the film subject to a treatment and that means more than a rich vocabulary in the two languages, although this is essential. Then, because good subtitling embraces not only a knowledge of the desired language, but also a knowledge of idioms, of dialects and a feeling of sensibility for the nuances of the foreign language.

It is generally accepted that filming is primarily an audio-visual art; however, its component of spoken and written language is worth analysing in some detail, particularly in regard to the way subtitling has made the act of reading an aspect of sound films, complicating the visual activity and the linguistic one. In this line, the aim of this article is to give a general description of the work involved in subtitling British and American films (González 1991), providing some assessments with regard to translation and considering to what extent the brevity of the subtitled text preserves the essence of what is actually being said simultaneously on the screen, as well as how far subtitles contain the character of the person saying it.
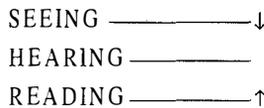
## 2. POSITIONING SUBTITLES ON THE SCREEN: GENERAL BACKGROUND

Everyone may be familiar with the annoying intrusiveness of subtitles such as the anxiety of incompleteness, inaccuracy, or even timed durations which may not be proper on some occasions. These negative aspects or limitations are in a certain way given and do not offer a very useful perspective from which to consider the overall significance of adding subtitles to a film. Accordingly, we will begin analysing firstly the alterations produced by the process of subtitling; then, we will explore the effects of

subtitles, pointing out that one experiences an added dimension of meaning in a subtitled film.

Subtitling involves a comprehensive knowledge of the language of the film about to be subjected to a treatment which, as it has already been suggested, is part summary, part translation, and part adaptation. The process of subtitling may be represented graphically as follows:

**Table 1**. Representation of the process of subtitling (adapted from Mayoral 1984*a*; 1984*b*)

$$
\begin{array}{l}
\text{SEEING} \;\underline{\hspace{2cm}}\downarrow \\
\text{HEARING} \;\underline{\hspace{2cm}} \\
\text{READING} \;\underline{\hspace{2cm}}\uparrow
\end{array}
$$

Because of the influence of elements from different nature, the process of subtitling presents technical limitations produced by the requirements to see, hear, and read a film simultaneously (Marleau 1982). Following this, much of the following discussion will be concentrated on the complex filmic conjunction of images and printed words.

It is writing the subtitles to fit that is the difficult part. The problem arises in compression because although a translator may be aware of the meanings in the film's language, the question is how the meanings can be compressed into the desired language in subtitles which should be read in the time available. After it, the process of subtitling creates an unusual heightening of our attention. Subtitle viewers have to work to master and overcome the requirements mentioned above so that they can give their attention to the basic film experience, controlling the time dimensions. While subtitles may disperse viewers' attention from the basic visual situation, they also give us something additional to do while watching a film, modifying the passive alertness with which we might watch films in our own language by the addition of the active mental exercise of reading (Marleau 1982:277).

Despite these limitations, the subtitled film provides a pleasant diversion. Because subtitles are frequently summaries of longer passages of dialogue or narration, for the viewer who understands the soundtrack

language a measurement of the accuracy of the translation becomes a kind of fun in itself. While the foregoing observation applies to viewers with a knowledge of the soundtrack language, even viewers with no such knowledge can get a special enjoyment from the effects of subtitles. Many of these effects flow from the tonality of the human voice, and they definitely add something, in a non-evaluative sense, to the film.

For better or worse, it is essential that we recognize that the subtitled version of a film enjoys a complex relationship to the original version. Subtitling a film adequately, however, is not a matter of providing every word that could appear in a sound transcript, but rather of interpreting accurately within the practical limitations imposed by subtitling itself. The subtitled text must be simple, concise and brief. Further, if printed on paper, the text should amount to a complete synopsis of the film.

The differing design features of written and spoken languages say that a perfect correspondence between the two cannot be obtained, and this determines that the screen appearance of the subtitles is conditioned by dialogue duration, irrespective of picture editing. Apart from that, the problems are those of all translators. In discussing some matters, special consideration will be given in this article to two aspects closely related to translation in order to convey real meanings: restructuring the language and eliminating non-essential information and difficult words.

## 3. SUBTITLE DISPLAY

Some recommendations regarding subtitle legibility (González 1991) are offered in this section together with other aspects of the television picture which influence subtitle timing. Most of these general recommendations are determined by the lack of correspondence we have previously made reference to, between written and spoken languages.

Viewers usually prefer the conventional bottom of the screen position for subtitling. As a rule, the teletext characters should be mixed (upper and lower case) and the standard punctuation of the target language should be used. When a subtitle comprises a complete sentence there is no need to place a full stop at the end of it, although this is optional. The use of written symbols such as interrogation and exclamation marks should

be confined to their proper purpose. In the case of exclamation marks, if the actors are exclaiming, there is no need to use the printed symbol unless the grammar requires. Words within a subtitle should be separated by a single space. The following example is an illustration of this:

> Don't do that!
> I'm warning you Trixie.

The maximum space available for subtitle text should be between thirty-two and thirty-four characters per line and a maximum subtitle length of two lines is recommended, together with the fact that the subtitle has to be displayed for a sufficient length of time. In practical terms this means allowing one second of display time for every two words of subtitle text (Baker 1981; 1982), although an alternative practical guide is that each full time of subtitle text should be displayed for at least three seconds. Accordingly, substantial concessions have to be made in the interests of readability.

Each subtitle should comprise ideally a single complete sentence since that makes the result look less staccato and hurried, although there are exceptions to this. The exception is that of very long sentences. Very frequently a dialogue is too long to fit into a single two-line subtitle as in the case of compound or complex sentences. When a sentence consists of more than one main clause which is joined by coordinating conjunctions as in "Big Daddy dotes on you, honey, and he just can't stand Brother Man and Brother Man's wife", it may become:

> Big Daddy dotes on you.

> He can't stand Brother Man
> and Brother Man's wife.

The procedure of breaking a long sentence into two or more separate sentences and to display them as consecutive subtitles is also appropriate with some sentences consisting of a main clause and one or more subordinate clauses which are joined by subordinate conjunctions such as *because*, *since*, *when*, etc., or by relative pronouns as *who*, *whom*, *which*, *whose*, etc. For example, "You can stop talking about graves since we don't know whether Big Daddy is going to live or die", becomes:

> Stop talking about graves.

> Big Daddy may live or die.

Although it is possible to break single main clauses effectively into more than one subtitle, sometimes breaking procedures are inappropriate. In such cases, the sentences have to be segmented at natural linguistic breaks, for instance, at clause boundaries, or after other major sentence constituent as the main verb, in such a way that each subtitle forms an integrated linguistic unit and, consequently, the linguistically coherent segmentation of the text improves readability and a steady understanding of the dialogue. For example, the sentence "That finishing school voice of yours sounds like you were running upstairs to tell somebody the house was on fire", may be displayed as consecutive subtitles:

> Your finishing school voice
> sounds like you were running upstairs...

> ..to tell the house was on fire.

Needless to say a coherent structure must not, of course, be attributed where none is intended, as when a speaker is under great stress through anger or grief. In general, when segmentation takes place, a sequence of dots (usually three at the end of the subtitle to be continued and two or three at the beginning of a continuation) are used to indicate the segmentation, as in the example given above as well as in the following one:

> What means him so big?
> His big heart, his big belly...

> ..or his big money?

Similar linguistic considerations as the ones given here should guide the subtitler in deciding how to present consecutive subtitles depending on whether the sentence can be segmented naturally. Thus, it is sometimes also possible to break a long sentence at phrase boundaries effectively into more than one subtitle:

> You are doing everything
> you can think of...

> ..to aid and abet them
> in grabbing control after Big Daddy...

In relation to timing and synchronization, it is crucial that subtitle appearance coincides with speech onset with the end of the speech segment. Similarly, if a character begins speaking off-camera before appearing on the screen, subtitle appearance should be delayed until the speaker is visible. Under conditions of rapid dialogue, an appropriate procedure is to display simultaneously the speech of two different speakers, a practice that is effective in short sequences of questions and answers. This technique is known in Scandinavia as *double-text* (Baker & Lambourne 1982). The lines of such subtitles begin with a dash, so their screen appearance would be something like:

**(a)**

> – Do we?
> – Do we what?

**(b)**

> – Don't you believe it?
> – You'll know soon enough.

Let us briefly reflect on some special techniques used for subtitle display before concluding this section. Words which carry special emphasis, voices off, songs, poems, quotations, etc., can be highlighted in subtitles by the use of upper case characters. Regarding the identification of the tone of voice, there are no resources to portray in subtitles a tone of voice which is particularly critical to meaning, although this can be usually determined by facial expressions when speakers are on-camera. A device which could provide additional help to convey the tone is the use of captions; nevertheless, this adds to reading time, so they should be used only sparingly. Something similar can be said about particular sound effects which are not obvious from the visual action and which should, accordingly, be subtitled as onomatopoeic spellings or descriptive statements if they provide more accurate and colourful presentation and create the background atmosphere for a scene.

**4. EDITING TECHNIQUES: LANGUAGE AND ECONOMIES**

Subtitle editing is limited to the fitting of a suitable amount of text into a given time-slot. The subtitler has to try to make every title a clear statement and avoid over-compressing sentences and uncommon words that could be deciphered from paper but not from a short duration subtitle, making comprehension much harder as a result. It should also be avoided to write a subtitle which is open to several interpretations, unless the original dialogue is ambiguous. Therefore, on some occasions ambiguous original dialogue must be given a more positive translation in order to maintain viewers' understanding.

Subtitle editing is limited to two different techniques. Firstly, there are words or phrases which can be simply deleted from an utterance. Decisions as to which pieces of information will be omitted depend on their relative importance in context, provided they are not crucial to the content of the scene. Alternatively, there is another editing technique which consists of completely rewriting an utterance, reducing considerably the display time. Rewrite editing is restricted particularly to those intransigent cases in which no other satisfactory solution is possible. Although it is not the purpose of this article to examine in great detail any of the techniques mentioned above, we would like to make an approach to them, giving a general description and providing examples which illustrate the work involved.

Colloquial expressions are frequently used to pad out speech. Under such circumstances, these items can be easily removed in subtitles without much loss of meaning. This is a very useful technique in the case of expressions such as *well*, *you know*, *you see*, *what I mean*, etc. Other words which can be easily deleted from an utterance are terms of affection as *darling, baby, sweetheart, honey,* etc. Thus, for example, the sentence **(a)** "Well, what's the difference?" and **(b)** "Don't you want to ride with the children, honey?" could be reduced to:

**(a)**

What's the difference?

**(b)**

> Don't you want to ride
> with the children?

The same can be stated for certain words or adjectives which are sometimes said of the same thing twice over in different words and can therefore be edited out without considerable loss of meaning. For instance, **(a)** "Well, suppose he is, honey. There are some things you've got to face, baby. There are some things in this world you've simply got to face" and **(b)** "We've got one thing on our side. No!, two things. – Are my seams straight? Big Daddy dotes on you, honey", may be rewritten as:

**(a)**

> Suppose he is.
> There are things you have to face.

**(b)**

> We've got two things on our side.
> Are my seams straight?

> Big Daddy dotes on you.

Abbreviations and acronyms are an adequate form of editing; however, they should only occur in subtitles if they are fully defined earlier or in those instances in which they are more common than the full form. Thus, terms as *TV* (for *television*) *PM* (for *Prime Minister*), *AP* (for *Associated Press*), *UP* (for *United Press*), etc., are acceptable:

> I couldn't keep it out
> of the local paper.

> AP got hold of it.

> Yes, and UP.

In general, Arabic numerals are also acceptable in most common circumstances following the conventions of the printed required language:

> – He's alright?
> – Feeling like 40 and talking like 20.

Informal verb forms such as *can't*, *don't*, *didn't*, *haven't*, *hasn't*, *'ll*, etc., are satisfactory forms of editing since they are common in informal writing. But, as a general rule, ambiguous forms such as *s* for *is* or *has*, *re* for *are*, etc., should be avoided since they invite several interpretations and, as a result, they tend to slow the reading. The two examples given below specify this. The first case shows how the informal verb form *can't* is an acceptable form of editing, whereas the second example shows that the ambiguous form *he's* (for *he has*) would not be acceptable:

(a)

> You can't stand drinking
> out of the same glass.

(b)

> He has still an eye for girls.

In addition to the rewriting strategies dealt with, it seems appropriate to confirm another justified editing technique within the constraints of minimum subtitle display. This is the simplification of syntax, insofar as simple syntactic structures tend to be shorter than complex syntactic structures. Although some texts tend to be wordy and replete with complex structures which can quite easily be simplified if it is necessary, a shorter syntactic structure is not inevitably simpler. It is for this reason that it should be taken into account if the simplified sentences take longer to interpret. Table 2 displays a few examples of rewriting editing where complex structure sentences are simplified so that the subtitler can be permitted somewhat more licence with display times.

**Table 2**. Simplification of syntax as an editing strategy

| Complex structure | Simplified structure |
|---|---|
| Couldn't you at least wash your hands before you did that? (11 words) | Wash your hands before doing that. (6 words) |
| Especially because you can't wring their necks if they've got no necks to wring. (14 words) | Having no necks, you can't wring them. (7 words) |
| Get everybody in the car now; we are all gonna go! (11 words) | Let's go! (2 words) |
| I'll tell you what they're up to, boy of mine. They're up to cutting you out of your father's estate. (20 words) | They are up to disinheriting you. (6 words) |
| Sister Mae looked up and smiled and waved and that drunk shot a squirt of tobacco juice right in her face. (21 words) | That drunk spat tobacco juice in Sister Mae's face. (9 words) |
| Why can't you lose your good looks, Brick? Most drinking men lose theirs; why can't you? I think you've even got better looking since you went on the bottle. (29 words) | You are more good-looking since you started drinking. (9 words) |
| The exploratory operation proved there's nothing wrong with Big Daddy. Nothing at all! (13 words) | Big Daddy is a well man. (6 words) |
| You should have seen Mae and Gooper's face. Uh! They almost dropped dead from shock themselves. (16 words) | Mae and Gooper were shocked. (5 words) |
| At least you can give him his present that I remembered to buy for you, for his birthday. (18 words) | Give him the present I bought for you. (8 words) |

| Complex structure | Simplified structure |
|---|---|
| Now you keep forgetting the conditions on which I agreed to stay on living with you. (16 words) | I agreed to live with you on certain conditions. (9 words) |
| Some single men stop drinking when they get married and others start. Brick never touched liquor before he... (18 words) | Brick started drinking when he got married. (7 words) |
| What is it, doc? You didn't leave that party just to come up here and discuss my health? (18 words) | Did you come to discuss my health? (7 words) |
| Every scrap on this table was raised right here on this place, deacon. I made a pasture land out of this place when it was nothing but a swamp. (29 words) | I made a pasture land from this place out of a swamp. (12 words) |
| And I know Big Daddy is just as proud as we are, knowing there's a whole dynasty of his flesh and blood waiting to take over. (26 words) | Big Daddy is proud to know they will take over. (10 words) |
| Oh, little girl. Somebody ought to teach you to knock before you open a door. (15 words) | Knock on the door before opening it. (7 words) |

## 5. SUBTITLING: TRANSLATION OR INTERPRETATION?

There are some issues worth discussing regarding the extent to which subtitles can go beyond literal translation in order to convey real meanings. Since special consideration has been given in this article to restructuring the language and eliminating non-essential information and difficult words, in this last section we will focus on how far to allow or avoid asserting some words or expressions themselves across the language barrier.

Perhaps one of the most curious consequences of a subtitled film is the possibility that the subtitled version retains a sense of lasting freshness and has a longer appeal than the original language version. It is natural that every certain period of time speakers go through linguistic evolutions altering diction, changing colloquial expressions, etc. This is something that the native speaker perceives, hearing and feeling the impact of such changes. But the subtitle reader does not.

The subtitle version of a film has to last for years and be understandable to all speakers of the language in all countries. In this way, one of the most important effects of experiencing a subtitled movie is the modulation of the content of the original version, something that is particularly effective with expressions which have merely local or limited life such as colloquialisms, slang, jargon, etc.

The subtitler has to avoid *in* words and expressions (*gonna*, *gotta*, *go on the rocks*, etc.) because they date swiftly and they will not be in period with the dialogue that is being translated. Needless to say, however, colloquialisms or specific vocabulary can sometimes form part of the characterization of a speaker. It is for this reason that the subtitler has to consider the roles played by the different speakers and, if appropriate, adapt editing style to suit such roles.

The appreciations we have been making so far refer also to naughty, indecent or swear words and double meanings for innocent wordings. These kinds of words and expressions written as subtitles are apparently more offensive than the same words spoken so one is obliged to learn the original meanings of ordinary words or the slang meanings, partly to be able to interpret them, to use them when the text demands it or, on the contrary, to avoid them in honest translation.

In other instances, the subtitled film may present foreign words which, should they be translated, some of them could lose their significance. Consequently, it is not necessary to translate literally some foreign words. This is particularly suitable when the foreign word is widely known and can thus be used instead of the too literal translation so that, through its use, it is conveyed the film's distinctive atmosphere, intensifying the power of the original language version.

The technical limitations of subtitles add a further burden to some of the most difficult forms of translation. That is wit and verbal humour, and unfamiliar idioms and dialects. As House (1973:167) states: "Since each language is unique in its diversification, translation of intralinguistic variation is severely curbed. It is usually quite impossible to render these variations in a satisfactory manner". Because these words and expressions may be particularly difficult to subtitle, they should be avoided since they create an unusual heightening of the subtitle viewers' attention, experiencing the feeling of frustration if they don't understand the language of the subtitles. In spite of that, if they are edited to contribute to the basic film knowledge, it is recommended extra reading time.

## 6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article we have sketched the basic guidelines for the subtitling of films, focussing the study on display techniques and language style, as the result of experimental research (González 1991). Its main purpose has been to offer an exposition of display and editing recommendations for subtitling. As such, the recommendations offered here are guidelines and not rules since the attempt to achieve perfect subtitling is sometimes considerably difficult.

Our approach is especially aimed at the promotion of subtitled films. And this is so not only from the useful perspective on the feeling one often has that a subtitled film is an experience that appeals to the intellect at a higher level than a film dubbed into one's native language. Moreover, the benefits of television subtitling for deaf readers and for hard of hearing viewers are by now well recognised, provided that subtitles are presented in a suitable form. Accordingly, in the long term, subtitled television may have an important role to play in exposing viewers to subtitles in an attractive and meaningful form.

## WORKS CITED

Baker, Robert G. 1981. *Guidelines for the Subtitling of Television Programmes*. IBA, ITCA: Southampton University.

Baker, Robert G. 1982. "ORACLE Subtitling for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing". Unpublished report to Independent Broadcasting Authority and Independent Television Companies Association.

Baker, Robert G. and Andrew D. Lambourne. 1982. "Split-level ORACLE Subtitling – a Method of Catering for the Less Able Reader". Unpublished paper available from the Department of Electronics Southampton University.

Fodor, I. 1976. *Film Dubbing: Phonetic, Semiotic, Esthetic & Psychological Aspects*. Hamburg: Buske.

González Rodríguez, María José. 1991. Análisis, Traducción y Subtitulado de "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof". Tesina. Universidad de La Laguna.

House, J. 1973. "Of the Limits of Translatability". *Babel*, 19 (4). Pp. 166-67.

Marleau, L. 1982. "Les sous-titres... un mal nécessaire". *Meta*, 27 (3). Pp. 271-85.

Mayoral, Asensio R. 1984*a*. "La Traducción y el Cine. El Subtítulo". *Babel*: *revista de los estudiantes de la EUTI*, 2. Pp. 16-26.

Mayoral, Asensio R. 1984*b*. "El Doblaje de Películas y la Fonética Visual". *Babel: revista de los estudiantes de la EUTI*, 2. Pp. 7-15.

Mounin, G. 1965. *Teoria e storia della traduzione*. Torino: Einaudi.

Rowe, Th. L. 1960. "The English Dubbing Text". *Babel*, 6 (3). Pp. 116-20.