

The Omission Strategy in Audiovisual Translation: The Case of Subtitles

Radia BENZEHRA
Mentouri University
Constantine - Algeria -

Abstract:

Globalization has increased the domains of translation and is challenging even more the translator's role. AVT emerged as the most dynamic developing trend within translation studies. AVT is a term used to cover subtitling and dubbing as well as a wide variety of translational activities. The paper aims at exploring and appreciating translational constraints and translational conventions involved in subtitling, which is the main form of translation or language transfer in television.

Key words: Omission; Strategy; Audiovisual; Translation; Subtitles; Repetition; Reformulation.

Introduction

The concept of subtitling can be defined as the written translation of the spoken language of a television program or movie into the language of the viewing audience. The translated text usually appears in one or two lines at the foot of the screen simultaneously with the dialogue in the source language. Thus, subtitling is the

simultaneous provision of meaning in two different languages, one in oral and the other in written text.

It is worth to be mentioned at this point that subtitles are different from translation in the sense that translation uses the same channel whereas subtitling shifts the balance from the verbal auditory channel, which includes the dialogue and background voices, to the verbal visual channel, consisting of the subtitles. The translator or subtitler must serve the audience by offering translations for those verbal elements that the audience needs to get the overall meaning. The ideal in subtitling is to translate each utterance in full; however, the medium imposes serious constraints on full text translation. One major obstacle is the limitations of the screen space. Another constraint is the duration of a subtitle, which depends on the quantity and complexity of the text, the speed of the dialogue, the average viewer's reading speed, in addition to the necessary intervals between subtitles (Pedersen 2003).

As a result, the subtitler often presents the source language dialogue in a condensed form. The length of the subtitles should be adjusted to the duration and to the spaces available. The paper, hence, investigates those constraints leading inevitably to the omission of certain verbal elements. The paper also attempts to answer questions such as: does quantitative reduction result in a

The Omission Strategy in Audiovisual Translation: The Case of Subtitles

loss of meaning? Is clarity; the essential principle of subtitling, affected or not?

To investigate omission as a viable strategy in subtitles, due to temporal and spatial constraints, we selected a corpus of parallel English-French translations of several utterances which appear in the script and the subtitles of one of the most watched series in the world **Prison break**. It should be noted that the most famous series in the world have English as the source language. English has, in fact, emerged as the largest source language in the world.

1 Quantitative constraints of subtitling

As explained above, subtitling is not easy due to the spatial and temporal constraints under which it is performed. For this reason, effective subtitling requires an understanding of those quantitative restrictions. In what follows, we review “the famous and infamous time and space restrictions of subtitling” (Gottlieb 2004: 219), which often restrict the subtitlers’ options. Some other constraints due to the nature of the medium itself will be referred to in the discussion.

Conveying the information contained in the original script in only two lines of a maximum of approximately 40 characters per line seems to be a common practice in subtitling. The number of characters

per line depends, on the one hand, on the time available for display and the speed at which the dialogue is spoken. It follows then, that the decision as to the number of characters depends partly on the flow of the linguistic material of the programme being subtitled, i.e., the length of the subtitle has to do with the quantity and complexity of the original text.

The subtitles should appear on the screen at the same time as the characters speak and have to be removed when they stop speaking. The translator should be in line with the events and characters of the movie or the program in order to avoid confusion. To enable viewers to realize that there has been a change of subtitles, there should be some time between subtitles projection, i.e., a necessary interval should be respected. The problem is when the talks of two or more characters overlap. Yule (1996:74) states that ‘the effect of overlapping talk creates a feeling of two voices collaborating as one, in harmony.’ Overlaps are merely represented as interruptions in subtitles, and the talk of the characters appears at the same time; a dash preceding each line. Ellipses appear at the point at which the interruption occurs.

Subtitles visibility often lends itself to sharp criticism among the viewers: the viewers cannot read as fast as they can hear and should be able to read the text while watching. One point should be borne in mind is

The Omission Strategy in Audiovisual Translation: The Case of Subtitles

that the viewers' reading speed varies according to their degree of literacy as well. The optimum display time has been estimated to be four seconds for one line and six to eight seconds for two lines. Reading and watching at the same time certainly requires a certain cognitive effort. There is a dispersion of attention: the image, on the one hand, and the written text, on the other hand. Audiences have to divide the viewing time between two different activities, reading the subtitles and watching the moving pictures, and constantly interrelating them. Then, the idea of space constraint is valid in the sense that the audience cannot spend the whole movie or program only reading subtitles.

It is worth mentioning at this point that conveying the original meaning into a target language does not imply a word for word translation. In fact, viewers receive also non verbal information from the images. This explains the omission of the characters' names, for instance, as we shall illustrate in the analysis of the selected corpus.

It should also be noted, as most translators would agree, that the flexibility of subtitles as to the number of spaces available depends on the target language itself. It seems, however, that there is an imposition of the number of lines for a text whatever language the subtitler is translating into. We would all agree that such an

imposition will not work equally well for all languages. Most contrastive studies carried out by linguists corroborate the above statement.

The subtitler is certainly aware of another constraint imposed by the semiotic shift or transition from the oral to the written medium: How can the subtitler represent irony or humor, for instance? The prosodic features are crucial to the interpretation of such speech acts. It is certainly difficult to translate the impact that a certain expression can have in its oral form into the written form even when this is spatio-temporally feasible. Hence, the subtitler should not attempt to transfer everything but rather capture the essence of what is said. As for the present paper we do suppose that when attempting to adjust the length of the subtitles to the spaces available and within the narrow confines of few seconds, certain linguistic items will be omitted. So to what extent does any decision about what can be deleted affect the meaning of the original dialogue?

2 The omission strategy in the selected corpus

In what follows, omission, as a translation strategy, will be investigated in a corpus of utterances collected from the original script of **Prison break** and their corresponding French subtitles.

The Omission Strategy in Audiovisual Translation: The Case of Subtitles

2.1 The selected corpus

Prison Break is an American action television series that premièred on the Fox Broadcasting Company in 2005. The original concept of the series in question is a man deliberately getting himself sent to prison in order to help his brother escape. Lincoln Burrows was sentenced to death for a crime he did not commit. Michael Scofield, the young brother, elaborated a plan to get his brother out of prison. The show recently concluded its third season. Season 3 continues from the second season finale, where most of the main characters ended up in Panama.

Burrows is exonerated from his alleged crimes, whereas Scofield is imprisoned at Sona Federal Prison facing a homicide charge. Michael and Lincoln are coerced by The Company into helping one of their convicted members James Whistler escape in exchange for the release of Sara (Michael' friend) and LJ (Lincoln's son). After a few failed attempts, Michael finally manages to break Whistler out of Sona. The season ends with Michael wanting to get revenge of Sara's death.

2.2 Omitting linguistic items of the original

Toury (1995) points out that Omission is a valid translation strategy which simply means replacing the

verbal material with nothing. We can add that omission also involves reformulation or rewording. Omission in the present paper is seen as any strategy involving condensation of the text. It follows then that omission can either be partial in that certain linguistic items in the original text are deleted and appear nowhere in the subtitles, or total, i.e., the original linguistic items are deleted and the original utterance is reformulated. The result is that the same message (in English) is expressed differently in French, and the number of words contained in the subtitles is less than the number of the words making up the original message.

To make things clear, let's consider the following example:

<p>a. You know, I keep waiting for you to mention a certain someone.</p>	<p>1. T'attends quoi pour me parler de ce que tu sais?</p>
<p>b. There's a reason a guy like you, with your skill set, was put in here, you know.</p>	<p>2. Un type avec vos compétences n'a pas été enfermé ici par hasard, vous savez.</p>

We noted, as the above examples illustrate, that it does not seem to be a rule to omit the phrase '**you know**' in all subtitles. However, phrases like: '**yeah, well**', '**yeah, uh- huh**', '**right, well...**', '**well, to be frank...**'

The Omission Strategy in Audiovisual Translation: The Case of Subtitles

are omitted in the French subtitles. We suppose that this is due to the fact that their translation is not essential for the comprehension of the target message. Linguistic economy seems to favour the omission of such phrases whose presence is rather functional; they function as introductory phrases.

But, notice that rendering the utterance **'I'd be pretty confident the charges will be dropped'** as **'ils abandonneront les poursuites'** results in a change in meaning. The English sentence implies that it is not sure that the charges will be dropped; the speaker is reassuring the other character. The subtitle, however, implies that the speaker is quite sure about this fact. The translator opted for an omission of such a nuance of meaning which does not completely alter the original meaning.

It should also be noted that certain informal exclamations, such as: **'man'**, **'boy'** and **'mate'**, used either to express a strong emotion such as excitement, or say something emphatically are – generally speaking – omitted in the French subtitles. **'Man'**, when translated, is rendered as **'vieux'** or **'mec'**.

It is also important to note that the names of the characters rarely appear in the subtitles. We suppose that this is due to the fact that they have already been established in the previous seasons (1 and 2). The name

appears in the subtitles when a character is talking about another character who can be either present or absent from the scene, but rarely when the characters are addressing each other.

As for the above examples, clearly (1) and (2) are reformulations of (a) and (b), respectively. It can be argued that the message is condensed not only to meet the spatio-temporal constraints of subtitling. The translator adopts a pragmatic approach which involves deleting the original items and replacing them with what, most likely, would be said in French. A pragmatic translation involves also a change in the grammatical structure as in (1).

Actually, condensation involves a grammatical change as the following examples illustrate: **'I just need you to lay low for a while. OK, sweetheart?'**, **'Okay, well, good news is that much of what you're saying is checked out at the crime scene'** and **'I've been putting together some notes'** as **'Fais-toi oublier un moment'**, **'Bonne nouvelle: Vos déclarations se vérifient sur la scène de crime'** and **'J'ai des notes'**, respectively. The French subtitles contain less words than the original text. It follows that omission involves different grammatical changes, as the above examples illustrate. Now let's illustrate reformulation (total omission) and the omission of repetition (partial omission) as two strategies involving a condensation of the original text.

The Omission Strategy in Audiovisual Translation: The Case of Subtitles

2.3 Omitting repetition

Consider the following examples:

<p>c. Go on; keep going.</p> <p>d. Uh, that's great, that's great.</p> <p>e. How about we work together, you know? Help each other out.</p> <p>f. Just checking, making sure, everything is all right.</p> <p>g. - I could've sworn you set this up. - I set this up? I'm in here.</p> <p>h. They say you got a good shot of walking out of here a free man.</p>	<p>3. Continue d'avancer.</p> <p>4. C'est super.</p> <p>5. On ferait bien de se serrer les coudes.</p> <p>6. Je vérifie juste que tout se passe bien.</p> <p>7. - J'aurais juré que c'est toi qui nous as piégés. - Moi ? On est dans le même bateau.</p> <p>8. T'as de bonnes chances d'être libéré.</p>
--	---

Indeed the redundant elements, or what the translator considers to be redundant, have either been completely left out as in (3), (4) and (6) or expressed implicitly as (5) and (7) illustrate or summed up as in (8). I would like to draw the readers' attention that the repetition in (e) communicates a hesitation which is not

rendered in the subtitle. Hence, there is a loss of the illocutionary force of the original utterance.

Omitting repetition as done in (7) is quite common in the French subtitles. In fact, ‘I set this up? With an emphasis on ‘I’ implies that the speaker is quite surprised at the speaker’s accusation. It seems that the French equivalent ‘Moi?’ communicates the same meaning. It can be argued that the above subtitles, though modified, do not really interfere with the general meaning of the original utterances.

2.4 Reformulation

A lot of examples illustrating reformulation as a strategy resulting in the omission of the original linguistic elements have been identified in the selected corpus.

i. Work time’s started now.	9. Maintenant, au boulot.
j. Am not interested.	10. Non, merci.
k. Of course, there is.	11. Mais si !
l. Not gonna happen.	12. Impossible.
m. One more thing, Linc.	13. Hé, Linc.
n. Well, here is the thing Raul.	14. Ecoutez, Raul.

**The Omission Strategy in Audiovisual Translation:
The Case of Subtitles**

<p>o. Time to fight.</p> <p>p. This is the first day of the rest of our lives.</p> <p>q. Just not good at making friends, are you?</p> <p>r. And I wash my hands of both of them.</p> <p>s. - They, uh, find anything else?</p> <p>- Like what?</p> <p>- A bag.</p> <p>- What was in it?</p> <p>- A little money.</p> <p>- No, sorry.</p> <p>- Of course, they didn't.</p> <p>t. I've got a guy in, in here, his name is Michael Scofield.</p> <p>u. If you want someone who can</p>	<p>15. C'est l'heure.</p> <p>16. Nos jours sont comptés.</p> <p>17. Toujours aussi sociable, toi.</p> <p>18. Leur sort m'indiffère.</p> <p>19. - Ils ont trouvé autre chose ?</p> <p>- Comme quoi ?</p> <p>- Un sac</p> <p>- Qui contiendrait ?</p> <p>- Un peu d'argent.</p> <p>- Non, désolé.</p> <p>- Ça m'aurait étonné.</p> <p>20. J'ai un dénommé Michael Scofield dans la prison.</p> <p>21. Le seul qui puisse agir,</p>
---	---

really do something, you're gonna have to wait for the consul.	c'est le consul.
v. Tracy McGrady shooting the ball in the hoop from downtown...	22. Les paniers de Tracy McGrady...

What comes out of the above table is that text condensation implements a pragmatic approach. The pragmatic approach consists in looking up for another way of expressing the same idea in the target language rather than simply translating the words literally. The result is that the original utterances are condensed to a shorter length as can clearly be noticed in (21). The available subtitle space seems to be a very significant factor in determining the translator's choices. It can be argued that it is not the only one, however.

In fact, the above subtitles, mainly (9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 16), are natural renderings of the English utterances in the sense that they constitute what a French speaker would have probably said under the same circumstances. Note also how irony in (q) and (17) can be expressed differently in both languages. Clearly, then, there is a concern with the quality of the subtitles.

The Omission Strategy in Audiovisual Translation: The Case of Subtitles

Moreover, (15) indicates the translator's assumption that the readers interrelate the moving pictures and the subtitles. This explains the omission of the word 'fight' in (o). Then, the loss, if it occurs, can sometimes be recovered from the images. It follows that the above subtitles, though reformulated, do not greatly interfere with the original content. Subtitling can be seen as a written synthesis of the oral discourse.

We can conclude up saying that subtitling presupposes the condensation of sentences to a shorter length, in number of words. In spite of this, the overall meaning is preserved.

CONCLUSION

The paper mainly investigates the amount of reduction subtitles presuppose. It seems that subtitles cannot be a complete transcription of the matching dialogue lines. Subtitles do involve omission in actual practice and most elements are omitted for reasons of text economy. The strategy tends to affect the verbal material that is less central for the viewers to understand the message. A decision as to which pieces of information to omit depends on the contribution of these pieces of information to the comprehension of the target series as a whole. It follows that omission relates to the decisions

made as to the importance of certain elements in the source text.

As far as our corpus is concerned, Omission in subtitling does not mean that anything is lost. Loss or change of meaning happens because the written text cannot transfer all the nuances of the spoken language. But, overall, the meaning effect tends to be preserved in subtitles. Transferring every word or piece of information is clearly an impossible objective. The translator's or subtitler's job consists of conveying the essential by adopting a pragmatic translation.

To end up with, and as a reflection, we do believe that subtitling can help foreign speakers of English improve their competence in English. Learners, even at advanced levels, who are not familiar with certain expressions, can take a look at subtitles to get the meaning of the original expressions. Subtitling, thus, contributes to foreign language learning. Practices in subtitling also lead us to take a fresh look at the translators' strategies.

REFERENCES

1. Gottlieb, Henrik (2004): 'Subtitles and International Anglification'. In Dollerup, Cay (ed.): *Worlds of Words: A Tribute to Arne Zettersten. Nordic Journal of English Studies. Special Issue*, Vol. 3, no 1, 2004.

The Omission Strategy in Audiovisual Translation: The Case of Subtitles

2. Pedersen, Jan (2003): *A Corpus-linguistic Investigation into Quantitative and Qualitative Reduction in Subtitles*. Örebro University, unpublished background study.
3. Spanakaki, Katia (2007): 'Translating Humour for Subtitling'. *Translation Journal*, Vol. 11, no 2. <http://accurapid.com/journal/40humor.htm>
4. Toury, Gideon (1995): *Descriptive Translation Studies – And Beyond*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins
5. Yule, George (1996): *Pragmatics*. OUP