

A CALL FOR RESEARCH ON FILM SUBTITLING

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“Every film is a foreign film. Foreign to some audience somewhere around the world. It is through subtitles...that an audience can experience different languages and cultures. And behind every foreign film that brings a culture to a viewer is a subtitler”. (*Sandeep Garcha, The Invisible Subtitler, Arc Pictures, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pz75i6EsOto>*) But subtitling and translation in general is routinely devalued and ignored within screen culture. Media makers and distributors regularly sideline translation requirements, affording them minimal care and funds. Even within the discipline of Translation Studies, the audiovisual constitutes a marginal area of research. And in film theory a subtitler’s influential role often goes unchartered. But no matter how flashy or impressive a movie may be, it's the subtitles that can stifle or showcase its quality. The impact a subtitling has on the viewer is undeniable but no one bothers about the one who is producing the text that scrolls under the magnificent images playing on screen. It is the subtitler who brings life to the foreign words the characters utter on screen. Subtitling as an industry holds out many promises, especially in a country like India where people speak diverse languages, where Bollywood produces the largest number of movies , where a serious business of regional cinema is ever present, where English remains a link language among at least the educated masses, and also a nation where our state of resource proves subtitling as a more cheap but efficient alternative to remaking and dubbing for an emerging movie maker to bring his films to wider audience.

In simple words, Subtitling is the process of adding timed on screen text to any audio-visual media. It provides a written rendering of spoken audio, in the shape of one or more lines of written text presented on the screen in sync with the original written message. What subtitles open to us is new vistas of enjoying foreign films. It is extremely crucial in helping non-native viewers to follow the story. 'No matter how flashy or impressive a movie may be, it's the subtitles that can stifle or showcase its quality. Although many audiences around the world, most of whom see foreign films dubbed, consider them the cinematic equivalent of Brussels sprouts, subtitles remain an unsung yet essential tool of movie going. And with technology improvements, more people speaking foreign languages and the modern habit of multi-tasking, the traditional aversion to watching a film while reading it just might be on the wane' (<http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1621155,00.html>)

Among the different forms of Audio visual translation subtitling is gaining currency over dubbing these days. Even in countries where dubbing predominates, subtitling is not unknown. In these countries there was always a demand for original version (subtitled) films from elite audiences. From “SUBTITLING OR DUBBING? An investigation of the effects from reading subtitles on understanding audiovisual material” by James Borell, it can be observed that due to various reasons associated with language acquisition, potential contribution to integration and economic advantages subtitle provides a better alternative than dubbing. In our current times this particular type of screen translation can be safely said to be of more important than any other forms of translation. A large quantity of subtitling is being produced and are immediately reaching people This augurs well in the Indian context with a large film industry not only in the form of ever thriving Bollywood but also various other serious regional cinemas. The linguistic diversity of India strengthen the case for the need of audiovisual translation and resource crunch and the presence of English as a link language (though its usability is restricted to an

English speaking Elite class) makes subtitling a natural choice. So subtitles, world over and in India, are bound to play more important role in near future. But unfortunately this due recognition is not accorded to subtitling or subtitlers. Paradox of the situation is the production of large quantity of subtitles with an assured immediacy of reception among a large number of people but the creators of these subtitles always remain invisible and unheard. Need of the hour is to bring subtitling to the fore. Unfortunately this rarely happens.

“Translation is routinely devalued and ignored within screen culture, particularly within Anglophone contexts. Media makers and distributors regularly side-line translation requirements, affording them minimal care and funds. Despite the ability of DVD technology to record up to 32 separate language tracks, for instance, distributors often provide inadequate translation options, at times presenting hearing audiences with subtitles prepared for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers (O’Sullivan 2011: 202). Along with this, lack of awareness of the scope of subtitling as an industry is also plaguing Indian scenario.

A very good reason for the “Invisibility” of subtitlers is the academic neglect and disdain. As stated earlier even within the field of translation studies, audio-visual translation and subtitling is considered of having minimal value and this trivializing has crossed over into the industry. On this, Jorge Díaz Cintas says “Authors like Whitman-Linsen (1992:17) have echoed this situation and have highlighted an urgent necessity ‘to dispel the disdain of literary intelligentsia, who seem to dismiss film translating and the degree of difficulty involved in it as not worthy of their attention’ He points out that the real reason why academia consider it outside the scope of translation is that most of the existing theories cease to function once applied to audio visual translation. This lack of research-perception of being marginal is similar to the irony of translation playing significant role since ages and translation studies a recent discipline.

This is not to say that there exists literally no academic discussions on the topic. But they are very few and relatively recent. A research in audiovisual translation was started with some articles published in Babel only in 1969. Afterwards some serious attempts were made but they mostly looked at the obstacles a screen translator face. Titford, Mayoral and Galloido were some notable figures among them. Balancing them, ZabalBeascoa came with his model of translation priorities. Viewing the audiovisual text from the professional point studies based on analysis of Genres and types of audiovisual texts were also made. Later on Descriptive Translation Studies or manipulative studies also contributed to the field. But the progress is slower than the need of the hour and gaps in researches are persisting.

Subtitling cannot be entirely studied within the scope of Translation studies because many of its aspects are not specifically situated within the discipline. A fruitful analysis requires recognition of a text’s external models. Frederic Chaume’s paper, “Subtitling: the long journey to academic acknowledgment” is a commendable attempt in rectifying the situation. The need is to build a bridge between Translation Studies and Film Studies. As Carax stated ‘cinema is a foreign language, a language created for those who need to travel to the other side of life’. A film subtitler’s job is to carry over this other side of life to a foreign language audience. Knowledge of cinematographic components becomes necessary component of analysis.

A film is loaded which are organized in a set pattern and cumulative effect of all these elements provide meaning to the viewer who deconstructs them simultaneously. The language of film, which the translator reproduces into written text in the target language, is a written script having both features of standard language as well as colloquial register that has to appear oral , natural and lively to the source language receivers. Though this issue pose more grave obstacle to dubbing, producing a target subtitle text true to the original is still daunting. At the same time subtitling shares certain general nuances of written translation.

Along with this, para linguistic features of an audio visual mode of expressions like silences, pauses, volume, tone necessitates a subtitler to use certain punctuations and capitalisation with a semantic signification quite different from other written translation. Music, sound and special effects are the concerns only an audio-visual translator face. These elements sometimes limit and yet another times bring relief. The visuals of the film aid the subtitler in overcoming cultural difference. However the challenge lies in producing a translation that is directly related to the images on screen. Chaume gives the example of difficulty that might arise while translating jokes in a different culture related to guns while an actual gun is displayed on screen. Subtitler's challenge is to produce a translation directly related to the image on screen. On the other hand non-existence of images allows freedom to a written text translator. A subtitler also faces problems when various characters are speaking simultaneously. While in other forms of translation all these different voices present in a text can be translated, the subtitler has to make a choice as he can only represent two characters in each subtitle. Speaking of the stringent technical restriction a subtitler is subjected to, these written script appearing mostly at the lower end of the screen can only have a maximum of two lines not exceeding thirty five words which is best to be displayed for about six seconds. Most of the time, a translator has to concentrate the whole dialogue into a smaller sentence with commonly used words and phrases and at times segment them to produce a synchronized output.

Another impediment is associated with the current nature of subtitling being a team activity. Subtitling involves transcribing the dialogues into source script, translating them into a target text and then adding them as subtitles to the film which in most cases are done by more than one professional there by bringing in a lot of professional and technical difficulties in its wake as no single expert can be pinned down as solely responsible for the product. All these combined add on to hurdles in conducting fruitful research activities.

So attempts should be made to argue for a joining together of various theories associated with translation studies, film studies and various other technical fields to develop a model of analysis of subtitling and there by addressing the academic neglect and narrowing the gap in critical knowledge. But bringing these different discipline including Film Studies into the realm of subtitling will not suffice. The subordinate status afforded to the study of film translation in other academic disciplines also need be dealt with.

Research in film mostly ignores translation though ever since the invention of cinema transfer of language was ever present. While most film analysis look into aspects of representation, authorship, semiotics, editing and plot, audio-visual translation and subtitling gets rarely mentioned. Attempts should also be made to bring subtitling and audio-visual translation in general into the purview of seminars and conferences on cinema. With subtitling gaining visibility in academic discussions the current state of affairs will change to a greater extent in gaining visibility for the marginalized subtitler. This is an urgent need as subtitling is a fast developing industrial activity world wide and Indian situation holds a lot of potential and promise.

Thus recognizing the need of bringing subtitling into academic discourse necessitates finding solutions to these difficulties researchers face. Along with a symbiotic arrangement between translation studies and film studies, construction of bridge between academic and professional field is also essential. Theoretical discourses on subtitling behind the shut doors of academic institution can do no benefit to the subtitlers. A merger of the two is necessary to avoid a potential schism.

But as Jeremy Munday observes "the construction of an interdisciplinary methodology is not straightforward, since few researches have the necessary expertise in a wide range of subjects..." Same is true in the Indian Context. But unlike the international scenario there is a general dearth of translators who have expertise in the technicalities of subtitling nor are many aware of the scope and breadth of the industry. Tackling the lack of interest shown by many in the academics can unveil the masked subtitler and bring in new

researchers and translators whose efforts in future will crystallize into works of paramount importance. Tackling the current challenges in research arena on subtitling , Indian academia as well as subtitling industry can reap benefits from the interest gathering momentum worldwide.