

Translation for dubbing into Spanish and Catalan: Criteria and traditions

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The task of dubbing from English into Spanish and Catalan needs to be studied by comparing the different methods used for the cinema and television. Films have their own code and their peculiar use of language: very often expressions which would be awkward in real life seem natural in the stereotyped context of a film. Translators into Catalan, mainly influenced by the rules and guidelines provided by TV3, have clear indications as to what to do when faced with certain recurrent problems, but in Spanish translations we do not find the same emphasis on correctness or one sole source to decide on the best solution. The main focus of interest in this area lies in the translation of colloquial expressions, first in deciding which can or cannot be described as colloquial and then determining their use. This is a project which is part of work being carried out by a group of researchers at Vic University.

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Introduction

The language used in films is not spontaneous speech but an artistic creation, a script. On the other hand, it is also meant to imitate real spoken communication. The ambivalent nature of film texts is thus the first problem to be taken into account. Scripts also conform to genre stereotypes such as those of the western, and they have to follow or establish some kind of relation with the rules tradition has settled on. The American cinema industry, which each year distributes hundreds of films throughout the world, knows that the language in their products has to be understood by a very diverse range of people with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This is the reason why the standard register is usually chosen instead of the colloquial or more literary registers.

This study draws its conclusions about translation from dubbed films available on DVD. Even though that means working with the final product, we must bear in mind that the final responsibility for that product is collective: “it is very important to insist on the process of adjustment, because during that stage the decisions which most affect the translation of

the script are taken. We should remember that the translation the translator produces is only a draft for the work of the adjuster” (Agost 1999: 124).

The standard language in fiction scripts is translated following different criteria depending on whether the target language is Spanish or Catalan. In the case of Catalan it is even different if the film is to be exhibited in cinemas or on television. Cinema is obviously an industry and has to look for profit, but public television has a social responsibility that cannot be ignored. This is even so in the case of a minority language that is seeing its social use tragically descending and has not achieved real stability. TV3, the Catalan public television, provides linguistic guidelines for translators in its *Red Book (Llibre vermell)* in order to offer the viewer the kind of language that its linguists think is appropriate. One of the first important points in these guidelines is the attention translators are to pay to the different linguistic registers, even though there is no clear line that divides the lexis into standard or literary language for example, or from spoken or written language for that matter.

Languages are so wide and varied that we cannot give advice for every problem that may arise in translation, and that is not the aim of the Catalan television network. The guidelines certainly give some homogeneity to audiovisual products but they also have a political meaning: “The rules for dubbing can be understood as an expression of the values and mentality of the culture of the target language [...], but also as an expression of the relations of power between the two cultures” (Ballester 1996: 210, cited in Palencia 2004: 16).

Two examples of the use of register

Let us now look at an example of the wrong use of lexis in film translations. In the film *Capote* (2005), the characters of Truman Capote and his friend Harper Lee are interviewing the girl who discovered the dead bodies of the Kansas family that had been killed. Harper Lee asks about a friend of hers who is a suspect:

HARPER LEE: How’s Danny been?

GIRL: Pretty shattered.

Translation into Spanish:

HARPER LEE: Cómo se siente Danny?

CHICA: Bastante destrozado.

Translation into Catalan:

HARPER LEE: En Danny com està?

NOIA: Força aixafat.

The translation into Spanish is correct, but the word “aixafat” the translator into Catalan has chosen is not likely to be used by a teenager today (“afecat” would probably be better). As we do not have statistics on use of every word this may be a matter of opinion, but even if this rendition is not incorrect it centers the attention of the viewer on the unexpected word and it breaks the verisimilitude. This happens again in another example where the sheriff’s wife is apologizing for her husband’s attitude:

- Sorry, he’s upset.

Spanish: Lo siento está alterado.

Catalan: Està molt trasbalsat.

The word “trasbalsat” is rather literary and is used in the written register more than in spoken discourse (a suggestion may be “nerviós”), although this depends on one’s experience with language and may be open to debate.

What is the aim of the Catalan translation here? Is it just to reproduce the original film or is it also a tool to reinforce and spread Catalan lexical items that are somehow not used enough? Perhaps words like “trasbalsat” ought to belong to common use. In fact, the media have been fundamental in the recovery of the Catalan language and words like “segell” (stamp) or “bustia” (letter box), which were not used at the beginning of Spain’s recent democratic period, are now parts of common speech. Translation for dubbing is then linked to linguistic policies which, on the other hand are continuously changing¹. This is true not only of the Catalan language, but also with respect to Spanish, albeit in a less controlled way.

Spanish has its Royal Academy (the *Real academia de la lengua*) as a source of guidance and producer of rules. Translators for dubbing consult it, as may any other writers. However, Spanish is spoken by millions of speakers in different countries and it allows many varieties without this endangering the good health of the language. This makes translators more relaxed about the use of grammatical and lexical variation, which may suit a character better, than is the case for translators into Catalan, who are conscious of the difficult situation of the language.

Are we thus to be continuously saving the Catalan language or, for the sake of verisimilitude and spontaneity, can we feel free to reproduce mistakes if they are necessary? What if this effort for correctness is making

¹ One example of this in the Catalan television is the use of foreign accents in Catalan (e.g. Mexican) which have now been omitted and changed for the standard.

viewers change channels or chose the Spanish DVD rather than the Catalan one?

The language in films that want to be successful has to be simple, stereotyped and clear. Very often Catalan translations display an excess of vocabulary and a richness of expression that misleads the viewer and is not appropriate, even though the result may be beautiful texts. We can see an example of this in the translations for *Star Wars III. The Revenge of the Sith* (2005):

PALPATINE: I can fell your anger.

PALATINE: Puedo sentir tu ira.

PALATINE: Et noto la fortor de la ira.

In Spanish we have a better translation because it is closer to the source text and it has a similar number of syllables. In this film, when scenes do not show a close-up, the Catalan translation tends to use longer sentences than the Spanish one and this makes the language lose its intensity:

PALPATINE: I am the Senate.

PALPATINE: Yo soy el Senado.

PALPATINE: Sóc jo qui mana al Senat.

However, translations into Catalan are not the only ones to favor the literary register. In fact, sometimes they are better than the Spanish, as in the case of *The Legend of Zorro* (2005). Here we have an example:

ELENA: I had a wonderful time.

ELENA: M'ho he passat molt bé.

ELENA: Ha sido una jornada sublime.

Again, the literary register involves sentences that are longer than those in English. On the other hand, the Catalan language seems to have trouble reproducing the colloquial or vulgar register or the jargon of young people. In the Catalan version of the Spanish film *Yo soy la Juani* (2006) we see that all the expressions used in young people's code are just phonetic adaptations of the Spanish:

No me mola: no em mola.

Me clapo: em clapo.

Me estás vacilando? M'estàs vacil•lant?

This shows that the influence of Spanish on Catalan is very strong in young people's speech, while the literary register enjoys good health and is quite rich in comparison. In a way, the emphasis on being correct has triumphed but the Catalan language has lost, since it needs its popular register just as much as it needs the formal and literary lexis.

Forms of address in Spanish and Catalan

Another interesting field of study is the change in meaning and social use of certain words and expressions. An example of this is the choice between the different styles of addressing people as “usted” or “tú”, which differ in Spanish and Catalan. This is always a significant decision as we only have the word “you” in English for most uses, leaving aside cases when we find surnames and names instead of “usted” and “tú”, which is a kind of equivalent. In the film *Star Wars III. The Revenge of the Sith* (2005) the Catalan translation uses “vostè” or “vos” in many instances that do not coincide with the Spanish “usted” or “vos” in the film, so the meaning of these forms of address is no longer equivalent. In Catalan “vostè” still seems to convey respect and deference towards the other; in Spanish “usted” points to social distance and aggressiveness.

In 1992 Garrido observed the ambiguity of meaning in the use of “tú” and “usted”: “The two options (inequality and equality) and their concomitant effects (courtesy, distance, insult or proposal of familiarity) can be explained taking into account that in the use of styles of address there are inferences which the listener has to make, from contextual information about the kind of relationship between the speakers” (1992: 1063). But even though many signs made Garrida think that “tú” would prevail over “usted” in the long run, he foresaw the possibility that the two form of address might be retained: “As social mobility and egalitarian ideology spread, the address system tends to equality. [...] In the egalitarian dimension there is a tendency towards the use of ‘tú’, which can be explained as the reanalysis of address” (1063). On the other hand, “the tendency towards the generalization of the use of ‘tú’ could be reversed, and the double option system may be kept before the innovative single-option one” (1064).

Let us consider an example of the uses of different forms of address in *The Revenge of the Sith* (2005) in Catalan and Spanish:

SOLDAT: Quan us he fallat?

OBI-WAN: Molt bé, llavors seré jo qui hauré de procurar no destruir tots els droids abans que arribeu vosaltres.

SOLDADO: Le he fallado alguna vez?

OBI-WAN: Muy bien, pues será yo quien procure no destruir a todos los droides antes de que lleguen ustedes.

Even though this example might be ambiguous in the Catalan translation because Obi-Wan is talking to a group of men and therefore in the plural, in other dialogues it is quite clear that he addresses the soldiers as “tú” while in Spanish he uses “usted/ustedes”. Obviously, Master and soldiers have fought together on previous occasions and are joking about their fighting skills, which makes the use of “usted” even more significant as a mark of social distance.

There is an added difficulty in this Star Wars film due to the use of “vos”, which in Spanish is ruled more by time factors than other considerations (e.g. films set in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries). The only indications found in TV3’s *Red book* advise us not to use “vos” in films set before the sixteenth century and to be especially careful to translate “you” as “tu” in epics set in ancient Rome. But in *The Revenge of the Sith* (2005) we find instances where the use of “vos” has to do with personal relationships and, very often, the dialogues show asymmetric examples that do not coincide with the typical young/old or superior/inferior pairs. While in Catalan the antagonist (Lord Sidious) addresses Master Yoda as “vos”, in Spanish he uses “usted” and this is meant to show lack of respect and aggressiveness.

YODA: M’han dit que un nou deixeble teniu, Emperador, o potser us hauria de dir Darth Sidious?

SIDIOUS: Mestre Yoda, encara sou viu!

YODA: He oído que un nuevo aprendiz teneis, Emperador, o debería llamaros Darth Sidious?

SIDIOUS: Maestro Yoda, ha sobrevivido!

The asymmetry is not the same in these two Latin-based languages. In Spanish Anakin and Obi-Wan address each other as “tú” because, even though one is the Master and the other the apprentice, they are equal in importance since Anakin knows himself to be special. On the other hand, in Catalan Anakin shows respect for his Master through the use of “vos” and this emphasizes his effort to be humble:

ANAKIN: Obi-Wan, que la força us acompanyi.

OBI-WAN: Adéu amic, i que t’acompanyi a tu.

ANAKIN: Obi-Wan, que la fuerza te acompañe.

OBI-WAN: Adiós amigo mío, que la fuerza te acompañe.

Although these differences may not seem very relevant, they are important for the drawing of the characters and therefore for verisimilitude and credibility. Fodor (1976) has described two types of synchrony other than the phonetic one: synchrony of content or of ideology, which consist on the coherence between the text and the plot, and synchrony of character, which deals with the relation between the sound of the voice and the movements of the actor or actress. The kind of study we are undertaking involves these two last synchronies or at least may be thought of as an extension of either one or the other.

Film translations can thus tell us a lot about the target language and, in our case, also about the differences and similarities between two closely related languages: “In translation and dubbing, translation itself is subject to transference that is not only linguistic but also cultural” (Palencia 2000: 5).

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