ΜΕΤΑ

What Dubbers of Children's Television Programmes Can Learn from Translators of Children's Books?

Eithne O'Connell

Résumé de l'article

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RÉSUMÉ

Les difficultés techniques reliées au doublage, combinées à la nature de la collaboration du processus de doublage, expliquent pourquoi traditionnellement les défis linguistiques de la traduction du doublage destiné aux enfants n'ont pas été étudiés attentivement. Étant donné que les améliorations dans l'enregistrement sonore augmentent la qualité technique du doublage, il est temps d'examiner de plus près la traduction. En raison des nombreux éléments communs des différents textes destinés aux enfants, les personnes effectuant le doublage de matériel audiovisuel pour enfants peuvent apprendre énormément des traducteurs d'autres textes (comme de livres ou bandes dessinées pour enfants) à propos de l'énorme défi venant de ce public cible.

ABSTRACT

Technical difficulties associated with dubbing, together with the collaborative nature of the dubbing process, explain why traditionally the linguistic challenges of dubbing translation for specific audiences such as children have not been studied very closely. As new developments in sound recording improve the technical quality of dubbing, it is time for the remaining textual translation issues to be addressed in more detail. Due to the many common characteristics of different text types aimed at children, dubbers of children's audiovisual material can learn a considerable amount from the translators of other texts, such as books and comics aimed at children, about the particular challenges posed by this target audience.

MOTS-CLÉS/KEYWORDS

screen translation, audiovisual translation, dubbing, children, animation

Introduction

In the last ten to fifteen years, there has been a slow but steady increase in the number of publications in the field of translation studies dealing specifically with the translation of children's literature. At the same time, there has also been an increase in publications addressing aspects of *audiovisual translation*, now more commonly referred to as *screen translation*.[1] However, to date very little has been written on the topic that combines these two subjects, i.e., the translation of audiovisual texts for children.[2] In this context, it is worth remembering that although children in many countries now tend to spend a significantly larger amount of time on average watching the screen than they do reading, there is little point in thinking of television etc. as being entirely separate from books. Indeed, audiovisual media can actually lead children back to more traditional written texts since many popular programmes, films etc. are based on books for children (Heidtmann 2000b: 82-98). Moreover, the

link can work in the opposite direction with new novels[3] and comics[4] being written and/or translated to respond to an interest in reading about characters first encountered on screen. In addition, in countries where minority languages are spoken, regular exposure to foreign subtitled material may be such that viewing audiovisual material constitutes a significant, though underestimated and undervalued, form of reading for older children and adults (Gambier 1994: 243).

Interestingly, research from Germany shows that animation makes up the lion's share of children's viewing (Heidtmann 1990: 422-427). Animation is very suitable for audiovisual translation and so cartoon scripts are frequently dubbed.[5] The reasons why animation and other children's programmes, such as puppet shows, lend themselves to dubbing are both technical and commercial. Technically speaking, typical problems of lip- and kinetic synchrony commonly associated with dubbing human actors are greatly reduced by the simplified physical representation of animation characters. From a commercial point of view, the fact that high quality animation can be revoiced for rebroadcast to a new audience of children at a fraction of the total original production costs also makes dubbing an attractive option. This is particularly true where minority languages are concerned. In view of these facts, and since narrative children's television programmes such as animation have many features in common with children's literature in the narrower sense of the term, it now seems timely to ask what can dubbers of children's programmes learn from those who write about a very closely related activity, namely the translation of children's literature, especially story books, picture books and comics.

Screen translation as constrained translation

The act of translation is at all times a linguistic activity which is constrained by a number of factors but screen translation may be considered constrained translation par excellence. Even if the translators involved in screen translation were able to overcome all the usual, inescapable challenges posed by the differences between the source and target languages and cultures, they would still have to face and overcome constraints of time and space in a way that is only rarely the case with reports, articles, novels, plays, etc. Time and space constraints can set an absolute limit to the target language options available to a screen translator. In the case of subtitling, for example, because people speak faster than they read, it follows that there is often simply no time on screen to include all the words spoken in the original text. Similarly, space constraints determined by the number of character spaces and lines available at the bottom of the screen may further restrict the target language possibilities. In the case of dubbing, a different type of time constraint applies in the form of the need to match the beginning (and usually, though not always, the end) of those source text utterances visible on screen with the corresponding target text utterance. Further related constraints, such as the frequent, though not absolute, need to achieve lip- and syllable synchrony may further complicate the task of dubbing.

Dubbing as team translation

A subtitler is basically a translator who can, ideally with the aid of a dedicated subtitling station, independently formulate, time and input subtitles ready for viewing.

But there is really no such thing as a dubber! Although a subtitling project can be subdivided and completed by a group working together in a coordinated fashion, it is much more commonly the case that a single set of subtitles is produced by an individual subtitler. But since dubbing is a complex post-production process and a rather long and complicated one at that,[6] it is virtually by definition a group activity involving a number of key skills which may be combined and applied in a variety of stages or sequences by a variable number of individuals. In most cases a dubbing translator drafts a translation, which is then reworked in studio by a dubbing script editor, possibly with input from dubbing actors and technicians. The initial translation in such a case may be a rough, i.e., quite literal, one. Often it is based primarily on the source language script and may be undertaken with or *without* seeing the programme in question. Such a translation is intended to serve as a literal guide to the dialogue and plot of the original and is often substantially reworked by the dubbing editor. On the other hand, the translator may be a dubbing specialist and is then expected to draft a more polished translation which already addresses questions of lip-synch, etc. In some cases, the dubbing translator and script editor may be one and the same person but it is equally possible that the editor may not even know or be fluent in the source language. For this reason, I propose to use the word *dubber* to refer not to the dubbing translator alone, but to the whole team of people who collectively contribute to the production of the final dubbed version.

As mentioned above, an initial rough draft translation may be prepared externally by a translator, but the bulk of the work of the dubber is conducted in a post-production house, using increasingly sophisticated and sound recording equipment to produce the revoiced target language version. Recent developments such as digital sound recording equipment now mean that actors' voices can be stretched or shortened a little to achieve near-perfect initial synchrony and duration of utterance match without incurring any discernible distortion of voice quality. So perhaps it is not surprising that studios tend to place a particular emphasis on the technological rather than the linguistic aspects of the dubbing process. A parallel for this can be found in the attention paid by publishers to typesetting and layout, etc., while the actually linguistic quality of a translated book is more or less taken for granted, provided that the text reads well. As the dubbing process becomes more straightforward, thanks to advances in post-production technology, and some of the constraints traditionally associated with dubbing are removed as a result, the purely linguistic and textual challenges of translating audiovisual material for children need to be examined more closely. In this context, dubbers could derive considerable benefit from the reflections of translators of other types of text for children. This is particularly true in relation to attaching due importance to the translation of the visual component in audiovisual texts (Oittinen 2000: 100-114 and O'Sullivan 2000: 275-295).

The status of translation for children

Existing literature on translating for children and on screen translation often starts by trying to explain the relative neglect of these areas and suggests that the origin of the problem may lie partially in the marginal status and low prestige of translation in general, as well as of children as a target audience and television as a medium, in particular. For example, Shavit (1994: 4-5) has described children's literature as the 'cinderella

of literary studies' while Hunt (1992: 2) suggests its status may be a reflection of the implicit values of the traditional hierarchical family system, which tends to under-value both women's writing and children's books. Weissbrod (1998: 36) argues that the marginalized status of children's literature (like other non-canonized types of literature, e.g., pulp fiction and translated literature in general) can be explained within the framework of polysystems theory, whereby literary works for children tend to occupy a peripheral position in most cultures while the centre is held by canonized works which a culture deems to constitute serious adult literature. Such a perspective emphasises the dynamic, changing nature of norms across time and cultures. In the case of translation for children, these may be, for example, didactic, ideological, ethi-cal or religious. The norms determine what is translated when and where and they change continually. Furthermore, the norms may vary from language to language, culture to culture, text type to text type and generation to generation. Thus, while specific norms exist in different cultures for the writing and translation of children's literature, it does not follow that the same approach is adopted in the case of any two languages at the same period in time or for the same language at different times. Indeed, as Shavit (1986), Even-Zohar (1992) and Toury (1995) have pointed out, translations for children produced in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century from German to Hebrew (a case of translation from a major to minority language), were highly literary and intended to have the didactic function of enrich-ing and developing the young readership's vocabulary. Thus, when translation was of central importance to Hebrew language planning efforts and was critical to the suc-cess or failure of the attempt to revive the language for everyday use, it was assigned a high degree of cultural prestige. Now that the Hebrew language has established itself as a more stable, multifaceted contemporary language with distinct registers and oral and written styles, translated children's books reflect more authentic colloquial varieties of contemporary Hebrew, tending more towards entertainment and less towards education. Examples like this, taken from the history of translation in other countries may bring home to dubbers and subtitlers the scope that exists for their low status work to contribute in a significant manner to the educational and language planning goals of some cultures.

Attitudes to illustrated children's books and television programmes

Even now within some educational, parental and other circles the view persists that the written word is paramount and that illustrated works such as picture books and comics are of relatively little benefit to children and may even hinder the develop-ment of their imaginative powers (Sahr 2001:69). This prejudice has also carried through to television, especially with respect to animation,[7] and there has been no shortage of critics of children's television programmes over the last forty years. But in reality both illustrated children's books and children's television animation have a great deal in common in terms of how they combine word and image and, indeed, both have much to offer children from an entertainment and educational point of view. One of the main criticisms of children's television viewing, which can also be levelled at listening to read-aloud books, is that the activity is largely *passive*. Yet Petersen (1997: 58) emphasises the active nature of children's viewing of cartoons/

animation, explaining that in addition to wanting to be entertained and amused, children also *actively* seek an opportunity to develop a sense of identity, to learn about norms and values and to become familiar with social and gender-specific roles. According to Gunter and McAleer (1997: 222), '…television watching can stimulate conversational skills, cooperation with other children, imaginative play, the development of logical inferences, the understanding of stories and insight into (and sympathy with) other people's dilemmas….' Moreover, the progression of children along what may be viewed as a kind of continuum from read-aloud and picture books through to comics may help to develop important skills for understanding and interpretating the very dominant audiovisual media. A child reads a picture book line-by-line and picture-by-picture and an additional new element of narration and dialogue dramatization may be added if it is read aloud, for example, by a parent or teacher. In comics, however, the child encounters and learns to interpret new and different narrative strategies and perspectives, which mirror somewhat those of audiovisual media. Examples cited by Sahr (2001: 29) include the use of close-ups and wide-angle shots within the same timeframe or sequence. One of the particularly attractive features of television is the highly accessible way in which it offers opportunities for exposure to what Asamen (1993: 309) calls 'the cultural tapestry' of the world we live in, i.e., 'the attitudes, values, views, thinking, and behaviours of cultures beyond the confines of the child's own phenomenology' (ibid.). This, of course, is a feature television shares with translation, making translated audiovisual material a potentially very influential intercultural medium in children's lives.

General characteristics of texts for children[8]

Dubbers, associating children's literature perhaps primarily with the great classic novels written or adapted for children, might at first feel that the differences between children's literary and audiovisual texts are too great for there to be much which they could learn from their published translation colleagues. But the term, *children's literature*, is actually something of a catch-all. Depending on definition, it can cover nursery rhymes, songs, poems, nonsense verse, riddles, fairytales, folktales, picture books, storybooks (with or without illustrations), books written specifically for children or abridged versions of adult books, short stories, novels, plays and sketches, cartoon and comic strips, educational or religious books, etc. This is why children's literature is now more and more seen as encompassing everything a child reads or listens to (Oittinen 1993: 37). Computer, video, radio and television and other kinds of audiovisual material have become just as important as books as far as the education and entertainment of young people is concerned. So when it comes to many of these texts, it is may be better to speak of *listeners* or *viewers* rather than *readers*. Oittinen (1993: 10) suggests the general term *receptor* is now more suitable in view of the range of texts written or translated for children and this suggestion emphasises the common ground shared by audiovisual texts and other texts aimed at children, especially those that combine image and text. The term *children* is so general as to make it somewhat difficult to talk in any great detail about texts for children without qualifying the term in some way. But certain characteristics that apply generally to written and audiovisual texts for children have been identified and an understanding of these should inform dubbers' work when translating material for children.

Firstly, although children's texts are categorised by their primary target audience, i.e., young readers, they address two audiences: children, for whom they have an educational and informative function, and adults, who generally see themselves cast in a supervisory or critical role. The adult group which reads/views and assesses texts for children is made up of editors and publishers and/or broadcasters, and at a late stage, parents, teachers and critics and these vested interests are clearly much more influential than the primary target group (Puurtinen 1995: 19). Adults decide what is commissioned, published or broadcast and these decisions are inevitably made very much from an adult perspective. The dual appeal is complex and contradictory by nature because the tastes of children and adults can vary so widely, as Shavit (1986: 37) tells us, 'but one thing is clear: in order for a children's book to be accepted by adults, it is not enough for it to be accepted by children.' Shavit goes on to argue that if the criterion for evaluating texts for children is not an educational one, as it sometimes clearly is, then it is usually the text's appeal to adults rather than children that counts.

Secondly, many books, programmes and other texts for children are what Shavit (1986: 63-91) calls 'ambivalent texts,' e.g., *Gulliver's Travels* or Disney animation films such as *Aladdin.* Ambivalent texts operate on a number of different levels of meaning and sophistication. In some cases, the story can be understood by a child in a conventional, literal sense. But it can also be interpreted by adults or older children on a more sophisticated or satirical level. Even children's texts, which are largely univalent, can contain layers of meaning to be decoded and appreciated by different groups, depending on their age and education, etc. In illustrated works, ambivalent messages are often created by means of clever juxtaposing of text and image. So for dubbers, it is important not to focus entirely on the script to the neglect of the visual information, which is an integral part of the totality of the text. Presumably, the different semantic layers contained in an original text were incorporated into it deliberately by the author and yet, due to the peripheral status generally occupied by children's texts within the polysystems of a particular culture, translators may feel free to adapt, omit or simplify. As a result, many ambivalent source texts for children are much more univalent in translation. This is something the translator needs to be aware of, although that is not to say that the production of univalent translations is always regrettable. After all, it has been the great achievement of Descriptive Translation Studies to show that even major interventions made in relation to the translation and/or adaptation[9] of a particular text, for a particular purpose, and a particular audience, etc. are not necessarily indicative of incompetence on the part of the translator but may, rather, prove to be perfectly valid within the given norms (Oittinen 2000:76-99).

Thirdly, authors of texts for children are people who are not members of the target group and therefore only have a limited knowledge and understanding of their audience. Although they were once children themselves, they are still writing for a group to which they no longer belong. Unfortunately, some writers of children's texts may be a little out of touch with childhood's concerns and modes of expression. Some adult authors of children's texts write in a manner designed as much to please the secondary audience of influential adults as they do to please their young readers. It is important to realise that insufficient familiarity with the precise needs and preferences of young readers and viewers is even more likely to be manifest in the case of trans-

lated material. While there are, in most countries, a small number of translators who specialise at least to some extent in works for children, there are very few who have actually had the benefit of formally studying translating for children and gaining a professional qualification in that specialism. Consequently, they may approach texts for children with a less than optimal awareness of the full range of entertainment, didactic, linguistic and other issues involved. This criticism can apply to both content and language use or, indeed, both. It may also be equally true of dubbers and other translators, though what is particularly important in the case of the former is a sound knowledge of the conventions of convincing dialogue and script writing. These conventions are highly specialised, culture-specific and a detailed knowledge of them is not acquired by chance.

In the case of minority language translation for children, where there is enormous potential for translated texts, especially audiovisual ones, to play a key role in the development and maintenance of endangered and possibly impoverished linguistic skills, the small volume of available work, coupled with other factors negatively influencing translation output, can make it very difficult for dubbers of children's programmes to focus exclusively on their specialism. In view of the high prestige and penetration of audiovisual material in minority language communities (which may be geographically scattered), it is particularily important that dubbers working in minority languages do not view their mission purely as the provision of light entertainment. In this respect, there is also much to be learnt from translators of children's books, who (despite low pay and status) tend to have a well developed sense of the vocational importance of their work in the overall context of the education of the younger generation of minority language speakers.

Fourthly and finally, another unusual feature of children's writing is that it serves more than one function and operates in accordance with literary, social and educational norms: children's literature belongs simultaneously to the literary system and the social-educational system, i.e., it is not only read for entertainment, recreation and literary experience but also used as a tool for education and socialization (Puurtinen 1995: 17). Puurtinen (1998: 525-526) later goes on to describe four clear purposes which children's texts are expected by adults to fulfil: entertainment, development of linguistic skills, socialisation and the acquisition of world knowledge. This marks out texts for children as very different from those intended for adults. Research has shown (Von Feilitzen 1976: 90-115) that children are aware of this multifunctional aspect of the audiovisual texts they watch on television. Thus original work for children must strike a balance between entertainment and usefulness in terms of educational value and comprehensibility. However, when texts for children are translated they are often subjected to substantial alteration, with respect to both language and plot, in line with what the translator feels is appropriate in relation to the norms of usefulness and comprehensibility from the perspective of the target culture. Clearly, it is just as important for dubbers of children's programmes, as it is for translators of children's books, to be aware of, and endeavour to reproduce in so far as possible in each case, the above-mentioned distinctive characteristics of children's texts, i.e., that they address two audiences, are ambivalent rather than univalent, are not generated by members of the primary target audience and finally, serve a number of functions. In this context and especially where minority languages are concerned, it would be important for broadcasters to work closely with language

planners and teachers so that entertainment and linguistic and other educational development goals can be well served by reflective dubbing practice.

Factors relevant to the translation of children's texts

It has been shown that the general problems presented by the translation of both children's and adult literature are broadly the same (Reib 1982: 7). What may be different is the range of translation strategies that the respective translators adopt. However certain factors, identified by Reib, complicate the translation of children's texts and can be subdivided into textual and non-textual factors. Textual factors include the difficulties that arise from poor working pay and conditions as well as unrealistic deadlines. These are, of course, linked to the low status of translations in general, unspecialised translators and editors and publishers who also exert influence on the translation process (O'Connell 1999: 212).

The main textual factors (ibid. 1982: 7-13), which should also be respected by dubbers, are outlined below. Firstly, texts aimed at children are both written and translated by adults. In other words, the target audience's linguistic competence does not correspond to that of the author/translator. The implications of this for the translator include the fact that special attention must be paid to creating a foreign language version which is pitched at the appropriate linguistic level for the likely target audience, bearing in mind that each age group of children has particular requirements. Furthermore, the translator must be able to reflect the language children of different ages use to communicate, and have good script writing skills.

Secondly, the translation of texts for children, like the writing of children's literature, is the work of adults and is evaluated by other adults before it ever reaches the so-called primary audience. Translators of children's texts often adapt to the norms that prevail in the target culture in relation to a range of linguistic, political, religious, national or other issues (Toury 1980,1995). This point can be well illustrated by looking at the translation of words or phrases that might be considered vulgar or even taboo (O'Connell 2000: 121). This tendency to tone down children's texts may be due to a divergence between source and target culture norms relating to vulgarity in oral and written texts for children. However, it is important for dubbers to realise that these kinds of references may have been very deliberately chosen by the author. After all, language that is vulgar, daring or indeed complicated often holds great appeal for young children, who are adding to their wordstore on an ongoing basis.

Thirdly, it is important to remember that a significant difference exists between the knowledge and linguistic skills of the translating adult and the children who make up the target language audience. Whereas the translator of material geared towards adults may expect the target readership to have approximately corresponding levels of linguistic skills, general knowledge and world experience and may only in exceptional cases need or wish to resort to such translation strategies as adaptation or explanation, the translator of children's texts adopts these strategies more freely. As Puurtinen (1995) has observed, translators of contemporary children's literature tend in general to conform to the norms and conventions of the target language and culture, at the expense of what would traditionally be considered a faithful translation. The preference for *fluent* rather than *abusive* translation strategies,[10] or for *acceptable* rather than *adequate* translation[11] when translating for children, is explained in

terms of the fact that a) adults often think children are unable to tolerate 'as much strangeness and foreignness as adult readers' (ibid.) and b) the peripheral position of translated children's texts in most cultures results in the translator opting for conventional rather than innovative linguistic solutions.

Such an approach to the translation of texts for children can have the effect of removing important ludic elements present on different levels in the original. But those who support such practice are at odds with the views of many successful authors of works for children, who have highlighted in their work the importance of playfulness in plot and language (Tucker 1981: 58). Tucker quotes Beatrix Potter's use of the word *soporific* in *The Tale of the Flopsy Bunnie,* which is followed in the story by '*I* have never felt sleepy after eating lettuce but then *I* am not a rabbit' (ibid.), as an example of how unfamiliar words can be linked to explanations in running text. This approach can often be adopted as a strategy in translation, even if it is not a feature of the original text. However, dubbers must remember that due to the specific constraints of space and time associated with audiovisual translation little omissions elsewhere in the translation may be necessary to compensate for any such explanatory additions.

Conclusion

As explained above, technical difficulties associated with dubbing, together with the collaborative nature of the dubbing process, explain why traditionally the linguistic challenges of dubbing translation for specific audiences such as children have not been studied very closely. As new developments in sound recording improve the technical quality of dubbing, it is time for the remaining textual translation issues to be addressed in more detail. Due to the many common characteristics of different text types aimed at children, dubbers of children's audiovisual material can learn a considerable amount from the translators of other texts, such as picture books and comics aimed at children, about the particular challenges posed by this target audience.

NOTES

1. Although the term *screen translation* includes within its scope audiovisual interlingual and intralingual translation for television, video, cinema, opera, CD-ROM, DVD, etc., the focus of this article is specifically the interlingual dubbing of television programmes for children unless otherwise stated.
2. Bassols et alia (1995) and Karamitroglou (2000) both refer to children as a particular target audience of audiovisual translation.
3. Mel Gilden became a best selling translated author in recent years in the FRG with a series of novels aimed at the youth audience to go with the Beverly Hills television series, while the German publisher Nürnberger BSV Verlag managed in six months to sell 500,000 copies of a translated novel by Edward W. Walsh based on the film Titanic and illustrated with photographs from the James Cameron film (Heidtmann 2000a: 20).
4. The popularity of cartoon series like *Biene Maja* and *Tom and Jerry* on German television has given rise to the publication of German language comics based on the same characters.
5. Although up to ten times more expensive than subtitling, dubbing is the preferred type of screen translation for younger children whose reading skills make following subtitles a little difficult (O'Connell 1998: 65-71).
6. For a step-by-step guide to the main stages in the dubbing process, see Luyken (1991: 73-79).
7. According to Hodge and Tripp (1986: 31), children's television animation or cartoons are seen as 'that despised form.'

8.   The following sections are based, in part, on O'Connell (2000: 100-126) and O'Connell (2003).
9.   Some theoreticians accept that translation is by definition adaptation while others use *adaptation* to refer to highly visible reworkings of texts, e.g., abridgements.
10. For a full discussion of *fluent* and *abusive* translation strategies, see Lewis (1985). For a summary, see Venuti (1992: 12).
11. For a discussion of *acceptable* versus *adequate* translation, see Toury (1995: 57).

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