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Having fun in the classroom: Subtitling activities

Abstract: This article analyses the role of subtitles both as a functional activity and a didactic tool in translation teaching and foreign language learning. It presents the results of a didactic project carried out with a class of university students enrolled in the first year of Laurea Magistrale in Lingue e Letterature Straniere (University of Parma). In particular, the aim of the project was to exploit the potentials of subtitling – and in particular those of fansubbing – in a formal teaching context such as a translation course (Lingua e Traduzione Inglese). More specifically, students were asked to engage in multimodal activities in order to create interlingual subtitles for a variety of TV series, acting as non-professional subtitlers. Such activities included the translation of episodes of their favourite TV programmes, ranging from medical dramas to crime, legal and science fiction series, thus presenting students with a variety of backgrounds and different fields. Using the software Subtitle Workshop, students were asked to complete the translation of the episode in a very short time, trying to solve as many problems as possible (regarding terminology, cultural references, language varieties, taboo language, etc.) and making the most of their fan cultural knowledge.

Keywords: translation, subtitling, fansubbing, didactics, pedagogical experiment

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1 Teaching translation

In the last decade, teaching translation has become an increasingly challenging area of research and practice in the academic environment. First of all, a distinction between language teaching and translation teaching should be made. Until very recently, in universities, translation was considered – and sometimes it still is – one of the many ways to teach a foreign language and to test the students' linguistic competence, and not the actual object of teaching. In other words, for a long time, translation was conceived as a type of exercise mostly aimed at assessing students' understanding of the original message. This conception of translation is referred to by Díaz Cintas as "academic" (Díaz Cintas 2008a: 2), as opposed

to new paradigms of translation teaching that can be defined as communicative and interactive. In recent years, however, more emphasis has been given in academic teaching contexts to the development of strategies and skills necessary for the process of translation rather than to language learning as such.

A communicative approach to translation is one that goes beyond the traditional procedure of exercise–correction–discussion and recreates an authentic situation, where the students translate as if they were in a professional or semi-professional environment. The translation teacher can take the role of facilitator, by providing a series of strategies and by giving access to different kinds of materials, and any translation course should consider giving students the tools to deal with as many types of texts as possible.

2 Teaching audiovisual translation

From a theoretical perspective, interest in translation teaching has been growing in the last three decades, which have witnessed an increasing number of publications (Delisle 1980; Baker 1992; Gile 2005; Robinson 2003; Kelly 2005; Kussmaul 1995; Gonzales Davies 2004). However, the majority of these publications tend to focus more on pedagogical issues in translation in general, and there is a lot still to be written on more specific areas of translation teaching such as audiovisual translation.

Since audiovisual translation (AVT) can be considered one of the most common forms of translation encountered in people's everyday lives, not only through cinema and television but also through the internet and new forms of advertising, teaching audiovisual translation has gained more and more importance. As stated by Díaz Cintas:

The growing pre-eminence of the audiovisual media in our society has been clearly visible in the proliferation of television stations, the academic interest in film and television studies, the arrival of the DVD, and the potential of digitizing the image and enhancing interactivity between broadcasters and viewers. More recently, the Internet seems to be leading the field in this audiovisual revolution. (Díaz Cintas 2008b: 89)

According to Díaz Cintas (2008b: 90), in this ever more globalised world, subtitling seems to be the most popular and expanding translation mode, and this is the reason why anyone involved in communication or translation should be familiar with this practice. Quite a few authors have already discussed the teaching of subtitling: Blane 1996; James 1998; Díaz Cintas 2001; Bartrina 2003, 2009; Bartrina & Espasa 2005. However, the tendency in these publications is often to place

more emphasis on the constraints that characterize subtitling, without really delving into the different activities that subtitling can offer in the classroom. A significant contribution was recently made by the volume edited by Díaz Cintas in 2008, which has opened the way for more research and experimental teaching activities of this kind. The present work sets out to follow this path and suggest activities that can be done in class by exploiting the possibilities offered by subtitling and technology.

3 Subtitling in foreign language learning

This article describes a didactic experiment carried out in a translation teaching programme to test the effect of subtitling on students' learning, hence on the validity of AVT both as a translation learning tool and as a language learning tool. Subtitling as a task that entails the actual addition of subtitles to a clip by students can have a notable impact on the improvement of a number of skills, ranging from translation to foreign language acquisition and increased cultural awareness. Due to its nature as an AVT task, the main advantages of subtitling are those related to translation. There are, however, a number of other benefits to be considered.

Several works have discussed the potential for using subtitles as a support for language learning, underlining their positive impact on the development of second language skills, oral comprehension, motivation, vocabulary building, etc. (Lambert et al. 1981; Holobow et al. 1984; Bird and Williams 2002; d'Yadewalle and Pavakanun 1997; Caimi 2006, 2008; Vanderplank 1988; Danan 2004; Araújo 2008; Borras and Lafayette 1994; Ryan 1998; Sokoli 2006). Moreover, the utility of subtitles in foreign language learning has been recognized by the European Union in relation to its current policy of multilingualism: "Subtitling is a spectacular tool for helping people learn languages easily and enjoyably" (Europa 2007). A few recent studies have also explored the use of subtitling software and techniques and their possible pedagogical applications and benefits (Díaz Cintas 1995, 1997, 2008b; Talavan 2010; Williams and Thorne 2000).

Although the focus in this article is on active subtitling rather than the consumption of subtitles, it is relevant to mention the positive effects of subtitles on language acquisition. Bearing all of this is mind, it follows that subtitling tasks can greatly benefit language learners. Besides raising learners' awareness of this translation mode, some of the aspects considered in this pedagogical experiment include linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge acquired by students while carrying out the translation task. It is also considered whether AVT can promote autonomous language learning as a life-long process, so that foreign language students can continue to increase their linguistic, cultural and social knowledge outside the classroom and even after finishing university.

The didactic application of activities based on the production of subtitles by students entails a series of benefits: it assists students in the development of various skills, provides them with different types of support (visual, textual, technological) for the development of translation and language skills, encourages learners to face authentic input, and produces tangible output (the subtitles produced by students) that can be shared with peers, or even on the web (Talavan 2010). More specifically, the core characteristics of subtitling, such as condensation and segmentation, can help students achieve a better comprehension of the oral input, because they need to understand the various communicative messages in order to translate and subtitle the scene. Moreover, as stated by Stoddart (2000), translation encourages students to think about meaning and form simultaneously.

4 Using subtitles in a translation course

The didactic project presented in this article was carried out with a class of university students enrolled in the first year of Laurea Magistrale in Lingue e Letterature Straniere (University of Parma), in the academic year 2011–2012. The teaching context is a translation course (Lingua e Traduzione Inglese), based on a social-constructivist approach (Kiraly 1999), according to which the learning experience takes place in an interactive learner-centred classroom where "the learning process is a matter of collaboratively acquiring (and co-creating) the language and behaviour of a social group". The main advantage of such a pedagogical approach is that students "can be expected to emerge from the educational experience as semi-professionals" (Kiraly 1999). In such a perspective, a translation course not only focuses on specific, exemplary translation or translation problems but tries to encourage students to develop a range of skills that they can adapt to the various contexts of any translation task. Students thus need to be aware of the context in order to detect all the cultural and linguistic nuances in the source text and transfer them to the target text.

An awareness of context will often determine students' ability to adapt the skills they obtained during the training to specific texts and modes (Kruger 2008: 74). The emphasis is thus on fostering students' ability to develop translational skills and strategies rather than on teaching translation as an academic discipline, which will also lead to greater language proficiency and an enhanced cultural awareness. In such a teaching-learning context, students are seen as would-be translators who must learn to

- fully understand the text to be translated;
- detect, interpret and deal with cultural gaps between source and target contexts:
- transfer a message into a different culture and for a different audience;
- write and rewrite:
- proofread:
- control and assess quality (Gouadec 2002: 33).

The focus of the course is on audiovisual translation and in particular on subtitling. Subtitling requires all the skills previously mentioned, so it is a challenging way for students both to explore the issues that confront this profession and to test their translation abilities. According to Kruger (2008: 79), subtitling can be integrated with more generic translation teaching, and can be used optimally "firstly to expose students to the benefits related to the constant need for creative translation solutions, often requiring agile lateral thinking skills, and secondly to introduce them to subtitling as a possible field of specialisation". Blane (1996: 186) states that interlingual subtitling has the capacity to motivate because it "engages students' interest and enthusiasm, promotes confidence and security, fosters development of L2 learning strategies and translation strategies and offers additional benefits in the form of transferable skills, relevant to the professional activities of the present and future".

Before they begin to subtitle, students are given a theoretical introduction to AVT so that they obtain a general picture of this field of translation. However, it is important to engage them from the very beginning, so it is advisable to ask them to translate and to use the subtitling equipment from an early stage, thus giving them a sense of empowerment and allowing them to be in control of their own work (Díaz Cintas 2008b: 92). Such a constructivist and inductive approach entails a shift from face-to-face classroom teaching to an environment in which students are encouraged to work independently and to learn outside the classroom by completing activities and carrying out new ones.

Subtitling is a very challenging translation activity: language in subtitles can be considered a specific type of discourse presenting a series of lexical, syntactical, and typographical characteristics that distinguish it, a sort of compromise between written and spoken discourse. In order to carry out the activity, students should be informed about the main principles that govern subtitling and the main constraints that shape it, as well as the semiotic priorities that need to be established (Díaz Cintas 2008b: 93). Students should be made aware of the specific usage of punctuation in subtitles, and of the importance of line breaks: "to create subtitles that can be easily read and understood, one of the golden rules is that they are semantically and syntactically self-contained" (Díaz Cintas 2008b: 100). As far as translation strategies are concerned, reduction – both in form of condensation and omission – is one of the main strategies that distinguish this kind of translation. Students are thus invited "to dismiss a word-for-word approach and to look for the main ideas being conveyed, rephrasing them in a way that sounds natural and does not jar with the image or the soundtrack of the original" (Díaz Cintas 2008b: 100). At the same time, it is important that students become aware of the risks associated with the shift from oral to written mode: smoothing out dialogue by turning it into lines that conform with the rules of written language may lead to significant loss in terms of characterization. Neutralising language variation, idiolects, and other markers means that all the characters speak in the same way.

Of course, it is impossible to recreate a professional environment in the class-room. For this reason, students are asked to act as non-professional subtitlers. In the context of the translation course described here, students are asked to engage in multimodal activities in order to create interlingual subtitles for a variety of TV series. In this way, a series of benefits can be obtained. First of all, motivation and engagement are promoted, because students are given the possibility to translate episodes of their favourite TV programmes. Secondly, the variety of these audiovisual products has an important pedagogical impact, because students, by translating medical dramas, crime, legal and science fiction series, can deal with a variety of fields and are presented with many different specialised languages. In this sense, their work can be considered as being similar to the activity of fansubbing, where fans of TV series subtitle episodes for free and share their subtitles with other fans on the web.

5 Fansubbing: a new form of non-professional subtitling

In contemporary society, where the visual component is becoming increasingly powerful and most people move between the computer and TV or DVD on a daily basis, language learners in general and translation students in particular feel very comfortable with activities that integrate all these familiar tools with which they interact every day in their private lives. That is why a translation course that engages students with the production of subtitles for their favourite audiovisual programmes, TV series, can be extremely motivating.

Besides being familiar with technology and willing to carry out multimodal activities, students are also well aware of the existence of fansubbing, which has become a mass social phenomenon on the web (Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez

2006) and a very common practice in Italy, thanks to dedicated websites and to the ever-increasing popularity of American and British TV series, According to the Italian TV critic Aldo Grasso (2007, Grasso and Scaglione 2009), TV series can be considered as a form of art that is representative of our contemporary, postmodern time. They represent a vital and intelligent form of TV, full of metaphorical meaning and references to literature, cinema, theatre and pop culture. TV series are a postmodern genre that – despite its apparent superficiality – displays the same narrative techniques and stylistic procedures found in the so-called high culture. Through various discursive and communicative strategies, TV series create emotional paths that involve the viewers and take them to fictional worlds. The linguistic and cultural richness of TV series makes them a perfect source text for students to translate, and since students are also fans of TV series, they act as fansubbers.

Fansubs (i.e. subtitles produced by fans) are nowadays the most important manifestation of fan translation (Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez 2006). Since the Italian broadcast of the first season of *Lost* in 2005, different groups of fans joined forces to form large communities aimed at subtitling a big number of TV products in the fastest way possible. In Italy, the practice of fansubbing is becoming more and more popular, thanks especially to dedicated websites such as *Italiansubs.it* and *Subsfactory.net*. These communities of amateur translators provide subtitles in Italian for animated Japanese films and for a vast number of American and British TV shows that have yet to be broadcast domestically and spread their translation on the web. Thanks to the massive growth of peer-to-peer networks, file-sharing programs and broadband, these practices have become easier to adopt and have expanded greatly from the anime subculture, mainly involving the genre of the TV series (Hills 2003; Scaglioni 2006, 2007). Fansubbing has thus moved to popular TV products, challenging geographical distance and also official programming practices: on the one hand, the practice of dubbing accused by fans of simplifying the semantic complexity of the original text; on the other, the long delays in the Italian scheduling of American TV series. All those fans who do not want to wait for months, sometimes even a year, before they can watch their favourite shows in the dubbed version, can download the subtitles of the latest episode just days - or even hours - after it has been broadcast in the United States. The ever-increasing popularity of American TV series (Lost, Grey's Anatomy, House MD, Desperate Housewives, Gossip Girl, Glee, etc.) has contributed significantly to the success of fansubbing in Italy, and at the same time the practice of fansubbing has helped to amplify the success of TV series, which have become even more appreciated by a large number of Italian viewers.

This new form of fan (and fun)-based audiovisual translation is the result of a different and new way of watching TV series (on the web, in forums and thanks to peer-to-peer networks). The growing success of the underground community of fansubbing exemplifies the participatory nature of contemporary culture (Jenkins 2006), where the boundaries between producers and consumers are blurred (Bold 2011) and fans gain access to the same digital equipment as professional translators. In a similar way, students can exploit this digital material and become fan translators inside and outside the classroom, performing the same activities as fan subtitlers. In a globalized world where everything must be immediately available, fansubbing seems to be an attempt to re-interpret the dynamics of translation, taking into consideration the needs of a globalized audience and giving the translator a degree of visibility never experienced before.

To a certain extent, fansubbing communities present a professional-style organization, with production routines, tasks, objectives, translation problems and roles involved. However, there are many important differences, resulting from the desire to offer an alternative to traditional AVT and to satisfy a specialised audience that shares the fandom experience and is very different from the much broader TV audience. Given the increasing significance of this phenomenon, it is important to make students aware of the "butterfly effects" (Pérez Gonzalez 2006: 260) that fansubbing methods might have on the professional field of AVT. It is also very useful to discuss with them the different translation approaches adopted by professional subtitlers and by fansubbers. As a matter of fact, fansubbers respect a series of guidelines that concern both technical and translation aspects. The main rule for fansubbers is to maintain the foreign nature of the ST as much as possible, in order to allow fans to enjoy their favourite programmes without the cultural lens of dubbing. Fans are supposed to be familiar with the cultural world represented in the TV series, and this is why fansubbers tend to keep the original cultural references unchanged, either through loans or calques. or sometimes using strategies of explication or explanation. As far as other translation issues are concerned, such as the use of idioms, slang, swear words, taboo language, language variation and multilingualism, fansubbers always try to respect the cultural and stylistic flavour of the original, adopting translation solutions that range from literal renderings to creative formulae.

6 Fansubbing activities in the classroom

The activities devised for the Lingua e Traduzione Inglese course include the translation of episodes of students' favourite TV programmes. After a theoretical introduction to AVT, subtitling and fansubbing, a survey was carried out in order to establish which were students' preferred TV series. Among the most popular TV series indicated by students were: *Grey's Anatomy, Gossip Girl, House MD*,

Criminal Minds, The Big Bang Theory, Game of Thrones, Law and Order. Following this list of most popular TV series, which range from medical dramas, crime and legal series to science fiction, a set of translation tasks was designed and assigned to students.

More specifically, students were asked to complete the translation of an episode in a very short time, trying to solve as many problems as possible (regarding terminology, cultural references, language varieties, taboo language, etc.) and making the most of their fan cultural knowledge. The subtitling software used in the context of this teaching experiment is Subtitle Workshop, which can be downloaded free and is very user-friendly. A free subtitling programme such as this allows the university to avoid financial investment and students to develop basic technical and software-related skills in subtitling, such as spotting, which consists of dividing the original dialogue into units to be subtitled, indicating the in and out time of each subtitle. Another advantage of this software is that students can download their own copy on their computers at home and work independently, exploring the various options of the programme and practising their translation skills with the source material they prefer.

Each translation task is carried out during a single lesson (2 hours), and it involves a series of stages or phases that are very similar to the fansubbing process. A pre-translation stage is dedicated to discussion of the translation task and the audiovisual product selected for the task, for example an episode of *House* MD. The discussion revolves around the plot, characters and possible translation problems. The second phase involves the organisation of the team of translators: the teacher, acting as the team manager, divides the transcript into different parts and allocates them to the team members, the students. During the lesson, students are not asked to do the spotting, in which the transcript is divided into lines or units that will become subtitles, with the right time-codes. Spotting can be time consuming, but it is a fundamental task that students should try to become familiar with. After being instructed on how to carry out this task, students can engage in spotting activities at home, thus fostering their autonomous learning.

The central task of the activity is the actual subtitling, when students produce subtitles translating from the dialogue list and working with Subtitle Workshop. With the video going on in the background, the student-translator starts the translation of his lines into Italian, constantly supported by online and offline reference works, by other team members (the other students), and by the team manager (the teacher). Every student translates according to his or her

¹ A time-code is an 8-digit code that locates with exact precision the hour, minute, second and frame of any point in the audiovisual programme (Díaz Cintas 2008b: 96).

knowledge, creating a personal sequence of lines that will have to be fully integrated with the previous and following ones produced by other students.

The post-translation stage is a fundamental step and it consists of the final revision. As a matter of fact, in this kind of activity students take on a double role: they act first as translators and then as editors, checking the consistency, uniformity and quality of the translation when all the different translated subtitles are put together. In this phase the teacher acts as a team moderator, helping students combine their varied translations, correcting mistakes and inaccuracies, checking that the same word has always been translated in the same way, asking team members for explanations, and encouraging discussion among students, who can compare their different translations and justify their choices. The posttranslation phase has many benefits: students are given the possibility of reflecting on their choices and they can learn from others. At this stage, important translation issues are discussed, such as the rendering of idiomatic expressions, slang, taboo language, language variation (idioms, dialects, sociolects), and the translation of cultural references. By comparing their translation solutions, students can improve their language skills and at the same time gain an increased cultural awareness.

7 Conclusions

The preliminary qualitative results obtained from this pedagogical experiment lead to the following conclusions:

- The production of subtitles by students helps to improve both translation skills and foreign language acquisition.
- The production of subtitles for their favourite TV series enhances students' motivation, improves their cultural knowledge and promotes vocabulary building.
- This type of activity can foster the development of a series of strategies related to audiovisual comprehension and audiovisual translation.
- The use of tools such as *Subtitle Workshop* promotes autonomous learning both inside and outside the classroom.

According to the results gathered so far, the positive responses of students and their increased interest during the course, it can be stated that the promotion of subtitling in a translation course can be one of the ways to meet the challenge of teaching language students interested in audiovisual translation. The use of subtitling in the form of fansubbing is a fun and challenging activity which combines a series of aspects that motivate, encourage and facilitate the development

of translation skills: it is recreational, familiar and dynamic, and it uses different codes. In our time, new technological resources allow the audience to choose the soundtrack and the subtitles that they want, and they also allow fans to access programmes to create subtitles that they can share with other fans. All of these aspects, together with the availability of free and accessible software, make the production of subtitles a realistic task that can be performed both inside the classroom as a pedagogical tool to improve translation skills and to enhance linguistic and cultural knowledge, and outside the classroom context, as a type of activity that helps develop learners' autonomy and reflects students' interests.

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Bionote

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