Title

From speech to text – Interlingual subtitles and subtitling practices in Switzerland

Abstract

Media accessibility has become a major issue in today's world and refers to the need to ensure that information and entertainment disseminated via audiovisual media can be used and understood by all, across linguistic and cultural barriers. Media accessibility, however, also means overcoming sensory barriers, making audiovisual content available for the hard-of-hearing, the deaf, and the blind. Access services therefore include a wide range of audiovisual translation modes: subtitling, dubbing, sign interpreting, and audio description. The significant expansion of these services has been facilitated by technological progress in computer-assisted and machine translation on the one hand, and digital television on the other. Recently, there has been a shift towards investigating accessibility in terms of overcoming sensory barriers, most notably in the form of intralingual subtitling. The more traditional interlingual subtitling, i.e. the transfer of oral source language content into written target language content, however raises a series of highly relevant questions for translation studies and linguistics that still await investigation, not least regarding the degree of norm conformity of subtitles or applied aspects such as the challenges of digital communication under the impact of considerable space constraints (comparable to text messages or Tweets) and cultural sensitivity.

Switzerland is a promising object of study for research into subtitling, not only because of its multilingual character, but also the language situation in German-speaking Switzerland, characterised by *diglossia* (standard vs. Swiss German dialects). Subtitling Swiss German productions into French (or Italian) is often complicated by the fact that these projects involve translating from a dialect. What is more, some interlingual subtitling projects may even involve three languages, such as when news programmes produced by Rhaeto-Romanic Television (RTR) are subtitled into French via German.

The present cooperation aims to bring together researchers working in several disciplines in order to lay the foundations for a research project investigating subtitles and subtitling in Switzerland. It will explore the following core questions: (1) What are the linguistic characteristics of interlingual subtitles of Swiss TV programmes? (2) To what extent do they reflect the source-language material? (3) What contextual factors such as programme genre, language pair or computer-assisted translation tools have a bearing on the linguistic features

of subtitles? Whereas these questions primarily deal with how linguistic barriers are overcome, the cooperation will also explore the feasibility of investigating how interlingual subtitles are used to overcome sensory barriers. Thus, television consumption is high among elderly people who often suffer from a hearing impairment. More research is needed to understand to what extent interlingual subtitles are consumed and understood by the hard-of-hearing and the deaf. To answer these research questions, the project will explore the use of a combination of methods (corpus analyses, observational studies of the subtitler's workplace, reception studies).

Project Leadership and Contacts

Prof. Dr. Alexander Künzli, University of Geneva (alexander.kuenzli@unige.ch)

Prof. Dr. Elisabeth Stark, University of Zurich (estark@rom.uzh.ch)

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Gion Linder (SWISSTXT)

Prof. Dr. Mike Martin (UZH)

Prof. Dr. Aurélie Picton (UNIGE)

Prof. Dr. Rico Valär (UZH)

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