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Film Translation: to Be or Not to Be

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*In this era of globalization the very attitude toward the audiovisual translation (AVT) changes, subtitling has become a growingly popular method that aggravates the culturological problems of AVT of art films. The problem of rendering substandard vocabulary and obscene words remains one of the most acute problems of translation. This problem is considered by studying Eric Rochant's *Mobius* (2013, France) which is interesting not only because French actors speak Russian and Russian actors speak French, but also for high percentage of obscene words, whose pragmatic effect differs considerably in oral speech and in subtitles.*

Keywords: audiovisual translation (AVT), subtitling, dubbing, general and typical challenges of AVT, obscene words translation.

Silent films are the easiest to translate

Andrey Gavrilov

Cinema penetrates every aspect of a present-day person's life. And it surely has entered the translation profession. There is one funny thing about translators' job: the way their professional activity is represented in movies. They are not so numerous but nevertheless these films enjoy wide popularity and their characters are loved by millions (*Gentlemen of Fortune, The Diamond arm, Kidnapping Caucasian Style, Ivan Vasilievich: Back to the Future, Russian Translation, The Interpreter...*). "Autumn Marathon" the hapless character of which has everything of a translation pro and nothing of a translation go getter is often referred to as film directed "under the banner of struggle with aggressive mediocrity". As D.I. Ermolovich says: "That struggle has never

been more urgent. And I wish I could say "They shall not pass!" But, alas, they shall... I do wish that not all of them will bluff way (to translator jobs)" (Ermolovich 2013, p. 312). It seems those words can also said about film translation in order to improve its quality and increase the audience confidence in the WORD that sounds in cinemas or on TV.

We'd like to begin pondering upon the subject of the article with a brief review of opinions expressed by population of *Translators City* website (<http://www.trworkshop.net>) and, to be more exact, by those who dwell on one of its pages with a symbolic name *Localization and Video Translation Lane* as their comments raise urgent questions of audiovisual translation. Here are some of them:

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- Translation of movies is a kind of translation which translators perform “for the love of the game” generally.
- Give up your riotous idea and romantic desire of translating films until it’s too late. <...> It is a tiny segment of the market where too much is subjective and conditional!
- <...> what do you expect from counterfeit DVDs? Sure, licensed ones are more expensive but the quality is higher and, to add to that, you can turn subtitles on and get the right meaning.
- It is great that many licensed DVDs have both dubbing and voice-over translation and usually the latter is of a higher quality. Here is an example of the dubbed translation of “Bicentennial Man”: Let’s make each other company! – *Присоединимся к другой компании!* (literally “let’s join ANOTHER company”).

We’d rather discuss topical problems in earnest and won’t join that notorious company leaving the thankless chore of analyzing translator’s errors and blunders for translation critics and those few sophisticated members of the audience who pay attention to them. The last remark can seem paradoxical and bewildering to experts of audiovisual translation so we will provide some proofs. After the French audience watched «Möbius» (Eric Rochant, 2013) 815 comments were left on the website <http://www.allocine.fr/film/fichefilm-197303/critiques/spectateurs/>. 105 viewers commented on the cultural linguistic aspect of the film, 30 of them noted the international background of characters and cast that caused multilingualism of the film (English, French and Russian languages), 20 thought that Jean Dujardin failed to play a Russian spy in a realistic way, 38 commented on the level of his proficiency in Russian, 8 noted poor quality

of dialogues. And only 11 persons mentioned subtitles and dubbing expressing disappointment with the translator’s decision to dub into French those dialogues that were in English but to use subtitles in case of translation from Russian into French as it made it more difficult to perceive the movie that was already heavily loaded with a cobweb of the plotline that prevented a viewer from understanding *who is who* and *who supports who*. But we’ll discuss it a bit later. Regardless the audience national identity their opinions are crucial especially if one considers the fact that cinematography is a “one way communication” (New Audiovisual Technologies 2005, p. 309) and even though “speech and music on the screen belong to the world of the movie” (ibid, p.313), “the movie should be a single whole and provoke future pondering upon the film after it was watched” (ibid, p.331).

However, it’s time to return to our muttons. The above mentioned movie as well opinions of the *Translators City* population need no comments as they exemplify challenges of audiovisual translation in general and, in particular, of its main types, dubbing and subtitling that are so often discussed by film translation experts. These challenges can be both of general and special character (Guidère 2011).

As for general challenges a translator faces certain difficulties of intersemiotic translation caused first and foremost by the nature of the film verbal component medium that, in order to avoid confusion of terms, we refer to as film dialogue and that requires simultaneous perception of the text that sounds from the screen, image, sound effects and music which often contributes to the general tonality of a film. All these components bear heterogeneous information transmitted both by verbal / nonverbal and visual / auditive signs. Thus, in film dialogue translation, it is necessary to take into account the polysemiotic nature of a film text while performing a pretranslation

analysis during a movie preview and while adjusting the final version of the scripts translation. (We mean an ideal translation performed in the environment optimal for the translator's activity but unfortunately the actual state of affairs is often contrary to the ideal).

It is clear that general challenges are characterized by interdisciplinary nature and are closely connected with the linguistic aspect.

What contribution do linguists and translation scholars make to the solution of these general problems? It should be mentioned that the interest of Russian scientists to the analysis of film text and its verbal component has been growing. It can be shown by the list of research studies published within the past decade (which is far from being complete) (Efremova 2004, Gorshkova 2006-2012, Ignatov 2007, Nazmutdinova 2008, Surgay 2008, Matasov 2009, Snetkova 2009, Fedorova 2009, Mukha 2011, Zaretskaya 2012, Kolodina 2013).

First of all, scientists who regard film dialogue as a particular type of a literary text try to establish new text categories. One of them is a category of tonality that, as we see it, is a conceptual category reflecting the culture studies aspect of a movie and expressed in the translation of realias and speech peculiarities of characters (Gorshkova 2006). Among other established textual categories specific character of which is researched in application to film dialogue there is, in particular, a category of informativity defined as a typological feature of a film linguistic system describing a capability of film dialogue to represent information in the interaction with the video image of the film. According to I.P. Mukha, the above mentioned category can be subdivided into four types:

- 1) full informativity – interaction of the film dialogue and image is minimal and the film dialogue is all-sufficient and is structured in accordance with

communicative-pragmatic rules of a dialogue interaction;

- 2) double informativity – in the film dialogue there is an indication to some objects on the screen and an effect of a double statement is created;
- 3) integrative informativity – the film dialogue interacts with nonverbal actions of characters in the closest way;
- 4) complimentary informativity – the film dialogue is aimed at creating a particular environment and shifts the information representation center from the verbal component to the video image (Mukha 2011).

Within the linguistic, text-centered approach to film dialogue a number of linguo-semiotic studies of interdisciplinary character are carried out with application of the latest ideas of philosophy and synergy. So, ideas of the French philosopher G. Deleuze about the Space-Image and Time-Image in cinema served as a basis for us to develop an idea of the Sense-Image of film dialogue (Gorshkova 2010), which was further elaborated in the thesis of E.A. Kolodina (Kolodina 2013). E.A. Kolodina regards film text and film dialogue as components of film discourse (as the whole). They are structural linear formations that are deterministic, stable, time sequenced, discriminated by sequence and interpenetration of verbal and visual components while film discourse is defined in terms of integrity typical of non-linear systems. Thus the Sense-Image can be described as an integral entity, in other words, an internal entity that can be cognized only in the context of the whole as the essence of semiosis, unity of individual and general, creating an authentic image in a viewer's mind.

The term "film discourse" is used in translation studies in increasing frequency. Thus S.S. Nazmutdinova develops a notion of

harmony as a translation category on the basis of the translation space concept introduced by L.V. Kushnina. Taking into consideration the specific character of the subject of research represented by film discourse Ms. Nazmutdinova expands the circle of explicit-implicit sense fields that interact in a synergetic way by introducing the audiovisual field and a new notion of iconic sense that is simultaneously represented by the sound and image (Nazmutdinova 2008). Hence, this idea has something in common with the above mentioned concept of the Sense-Image.

“Film translation has one striking peculiarity – it is not taught anywhere” (S. Kozin). In the context of our article it is worth mentioning an interesting linguodidactic study carried out by R.A. Matasov who complains about the fact that now future translation specialists rarely get professional training in film/video translation (FVT). He stands for introduction of FVT training in universities because digital television successfully replaces the analogue one in many countries and DVD format with up to eight dubbed versions and 32 subtitle sets on a disk and its successful competitor Blue-ray get a worldwide distribution (Matasov 2009). The author suggests introducing his own program for training film/video translators and the only question is whether it was tested in the education process.

In our opinion any attempt of didactic comprehension of audiovisual translation should be welcome. Once we also developed a system of film dialogue translation exercises in accordance with the levels of education: either elementary or advanced. We based the system on the principle of “learning by mistakes”, intralinguistic translation and comparative analysis of the original text sounding from the screen and its official translation. Students found the second, advanced, level more challenging as its exercises were based on texts rich in national realias of high

cultural importance and colloquialisms. Thus we can conclude that our experiment completely agrees with «the pyramid of semantic synthesis competences» (A.V. Kozulyaev’s term) required from a film translator; one of the most crucial of them is a socio-cultural competence that provides understanding of nonlinguistic, socio-cultural aspects a translator needs in order to determine the general translation strategy (Kozulyaev 2012).

The above analysis allows us to approach challenges typical of audiovisual translation predetermined by a number of questions a film translator should answer and, first and foremost, what type of film translation he/she is to be guided by. (See a diagram below: Process-oriented approach to film dialogue translation, where *E* – emitter or speaker, *S* – sense, *C* – transmission channel, *R* – recipient, *SL* – source language, *TL* – target language):

We’d like to emphasize that the above diagram is open for further elaboration, and in particular as far as subtitling is concerned because it is necessary to create 3- and more- D subtitles for the modern cinematograph. It is a fact that there are 7D movies and viewers who watch them get quite a thrilling experience due to the moving floor, armchairs with special effects, simulation of environmental conditions (lightning, rain effect, virtual smoke, smell). Such cinemas are equipped with a circular screen and the image is distributed at the centers of circular sections so that the field of view is expanded up to 180 degrees. Thus a translator who is to render subtitles for such movie faces a great challenge.

Once the choice is made it determines translation solutions connected with the translation process dominant, to be more exact, the factor that is of primary importance in the translation process: is it linguistic component, target audience, client’s demands, etc.? We leave it for experts to perform a detailed analysis of these

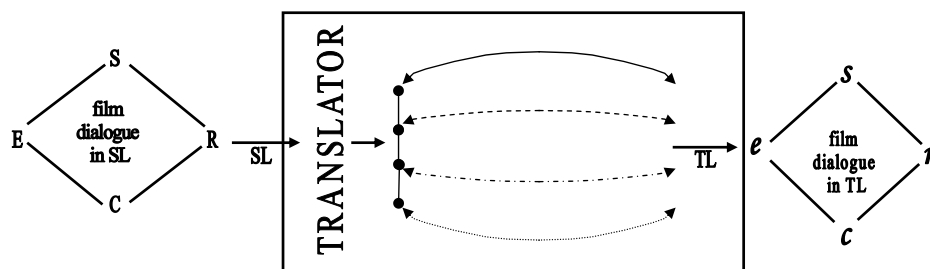


Diagram. Process-oriented approach to film dialogue translation

Legend:

- dubbing
- - - subtitling
- · - · voice-over
- translation for the blind audience

constraints and turn the focus of our discussion back to the film «Möbius» in the context of its two versions – the original and the dubbed one. (One should not confuse it with Kim Ki-duk movie «Moebius» screened out of competition at the Venice Film Festival in 2013).

The film is chosen for a good reason and not for its artistic merits or demerits. Firstly, it is a movie that required some kind of “internal translation” due to international cast who play spies of every stripe, including a number of Russian film stars, Alexei Gorbounov being one of them. The Russian background of their characters who occasionally speak French is emphasized by an inimitable Russian accent making the film especially vivid and colorful. Vulgar invective Russian expressions are not dubbed but rather translated in subtitles in order to keep the “music” of the original word intact. All these facts are reflected in the above mentioned comments of the French viewers.

And what impression does the film dubbing leave on the Russian audience? It appears necessary to cite S. Kozin's words that a translator has to feel genre and style, match temper and speech peculiarities of characters in the process of dubbing: “If a character's speech differs from speech of others one has to notice it and keep it in the translation otherwise the character will lose

his individuality and will be killed. Dubbing is a bit like killing a part: an actor loses his major tool – the voice.” That is exactly what happens to the character of Alexei Gorbounov who plays a bodyguard of a Russian tycoon (Tim Roth who speaks English!). In the dubbed Russian version Gorbounov has lost his peculiar husky voice (he is not on the list of actors who dubbed the movie), his incomparable French accent (which was very nice!) and obscene words were replaced by vulgar but more politically correct Russian expressions (that's what we agree with). As a result the movie in general has lost some of its charm, its sound tonality disappearing, the Sense-Image of the film dialogue turning blurry and insipid.

And the final remark. This summer the author of the article got a chance to visit the Lumiere brothers museum in Lyon (France) and was excited to see their camera – “cinématographe” that cinema owes its name to. It was the Lumieres' camera that was used in 1995, the cinema's centenary year, by forty famous directors to make forty films, each 52 seconds long, including “The arrival of a train” starring a modern high-speed train (TGV). The directors mentioned were interviewed and asked two questions: *Why do you make films* and *Will cinema die as an art?* The second question was answered unanimously:

Cinema will live as long as a man lives on the Earth.

As if to prove these words a similar experiment was carried out again by August 2013. That time seventy directors made seventy films one and a half minute long each in honour of the

Venice Film Festival's seventieth anniversary. The films were shot with modern equipment while their main theme was cinema's FUTURE. So we can conclude that a film translator's job will be in great demand as soon as modern cinema seldom does without a WORD.

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Аудиовизуальный перевод:

“to be or not to be”

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В эпоху глобализации меняется само отношение к аудиовизуальному переводу, все более склоняющемуся в пользу перевода субтитрами, что усугубляет культурологические проблемы данного вида перевода в приложении к художественным фильмам. Одной из самых острых проблем остается перевод сниженной и бранной лексики, все чаще присутствующей в речи персонажей современных фильмов, рассмотренный на примере фильма «Мёбиус» (реж. Эрик Рошан, Франция, 2013), интересного не только любопытным решением озвучивания (французские актеры говорят по-русски, а русские – по-французски), но и насыщенностью означенной выше лексикой, прагматический эффект которой в звучащей речи и субтитрах значительно отличается степенью своей выраженности.

Ключевые слова: аудиовизуальный перевод, перевод субтитрами, дубляж, общие и специфические проблемы АВП, передача бранной лексики.
