

UPON THE SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION OF FILMS

By

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My use of the term "translation" as opposed to "interpretation" is deliberate. In eight years of experience of translating films at the Venice Film Festival I have never been required to interpret a film directly from the sound-track without either sub-titles or a copy of the script. I would in any case consider the task impossible for a variety of reasons. For the purpose of the present article I do not wish to consider the reading of a script directly in the target language as there is no translation or interpretation process but only a delivery or, in a very limited sense, a performance process involved. Neither do I wish to consider the cases in which the interpreter has ample time to view the films together with scripts and prepare his performance. I wish to take the case in which the interpreter is required at a first or second viewing to translate the dialogues of a film either from sub-titles or from a source language script. These are not ideal working conditions, they are, in fact, the worst possible working conditions, but they are the only ones in which the use of the term "simultaneous" is justifiable. I would wish to propose that the use of the term "simultaneous interpretation" be limited to the interpretation of an impromptu speech or to the interpretation of a conference paper with a written text used only as a guide by the speaker. The verbatim repetition of a written text, the translation of which the interpreter has ample time to prepare, seems to me a different operation altogether. With regard to films, the operation is comparable to that of a rapid sight translation with visual aids if the interpreter knows only the language of the sub-titles or script but not that of the sound-track, translating, for example, a Turkish film from the Italian sub-titles. If, however, he knows both the language of the original dialogue and the language of the sub-titles or script, he has the opportunity to operate a kind of double cross-check on his sight translation with both visual and language aids - translating into English a French film with Italian sub-titles. Each of the processes is

stimulating and a closer examination may reveal that the relationship between sight translation and simultaneous interpretation is closer than Maurizio Viezzi¹ expects (though he, admittedly, only uses the term in the sense of the translation of an unprepared written text) with possible far-reaching consequences upon the pedagogical approach to the simultaneous interpretation of speeches and conference papers.

First, a declaration of faith. I have always maintained that the interpreter is a modest *comprimario* whose discretion and professional skills are best displayed when he least intrudes upon his listening public. The theatre critic of *La Repubblica*, who complained about an "irritating simultaneous service with the interpreters imposing their inflections upon those of the actors" after the Venice performances of *The Doll's House* by the Royal Dramatic Theatre of Stockholm, would appear to share my view. I am of the same mind with reference to conference interpreting but, if ever there were a case for a minimalist evaluation of the interpreters' role, then the occasion upon which a viewing and listening public come to appreciate the work of a performing artist is that very case. The interpreter is not an artist, he is an artisan. In this specific case his very presence is a nuisance and his listening public would rather not have to depend upon his services at all.

There may be justification, within a discrete range, for a conference interpreter underlining the emotional content of a speech, but there is no justification whatever for the interpreter underscoring with his own personal inflections what is already apparent but expressed with other means. The theory of information prescribes a rigorous economy of means in transmitting a message. I would apply the same

¹ Maurizio VIEZZI, "Information Retention as a Parameter for the Comparison of Sight Translation and Simultaneous Interpretation: An Experimental Study" in *The Interpreters' Newsletter*, N° 2, SSLM, University of Trieste, 1989.

principle of the suppression of the redundant channel to the translation of films. That which is immediately clear from the action on the screen or from the sub-titles need not, indeed should not be repeated by the interpreter. If the protagonist, in anguish, repeatedly declaims the name of his beloved then the interpreter need only hint at it once. The emotion is immediately transparent from the context (and from the volume) and any further intensification on the interpreter's part is superfluous. Numerals appearing on the screen need not be rendered. Not that the interpreter has to abdicate his role of information filter. A viewing public unfamiliar with Russian styles of address might take some time to conclude that Kolyushka, Kolya, Nikolai and Nikolai Ivanovich are actually the same person and might be grateful to the interpreter for the simplicity of Nikolai and be content to rely on the performers' tone and the visual image for a more acute perception of the degree of intimacy or formality of the screen relationship.

When the interpreter understands both the original language and the sub-titles, problems arise when there is any discrepancy between the two. The suspicion may arise that the sub-titles have been translated from the script without a vision of the film or literally without any serious consideration of the language register or context. I have been called upon to translate a French film in which the hero was taking the heroine for a walk along the banks of the Seine. He was anxious to conclude the operation rapidly. She was determined to draw it out as long as possible. Impatience and ardour eventually erupted and he asked her whether or not her intention was to "y passer toute la nuit". The Italian sub-titles ran: "Vogliamo dormire qua?" giving the impression of an invitation to spread a mattress upon the paving-stones rather than an injunction to cut it short and make a decision one way or the other, as was clear from the tension, physical and vocal, conveyed by the protagonist.

Too literal a translation of an original text leads to multiple confusion. A French colleague working from an English original with Italian sub-titles enjoys telling the story of a hero arriving, hung-over and ill-shaven with bags under his eyes. An English-speaking audience could always anticipate the rhetorical question "A night on the tiles?", though the readers of the Italian sub-title "Sei stato sulle mattonelle?" would be justified in feeling slightly bewildered - not to mention the French victims of an unwary sight translation without knowledge of the idiomatic register or reference to the visual aid provided by the screen image.

The problems are further compounded if the

interpreter is only aware of the language of the script or sub-titles. There, too, the problem differs from language to language. The general consensus of opinion is, of which more upon some subsequent occasion, that the ideal intermediate or *relais* language is French. My impression is that this view is shared not only by film interpreters but also by conference interpreters having to take speeches made in Arabic, Russian or German from one of their fellow interpreters, but with regard to film sub-titles one point is immediately apparent for the English translator. French provides the pronouns whereas Italian does not. Though Italian colleagues having to translate from French sub-titles always have to decide whether "vous" is a polite second person singular ("Lei") or plural ("loro") or a familiar second person plural. The interpreter working into English may not only avail himself of the multipurpose "you" but has, in dire straits, a series of linguistic alternatives to resort to. The Italian sub-title "Ha deciso?" may mean "Have you decided?" if the dialogue is clearly between the two characters on the screen. It may equally mean "Has he (or she) decided?" if reference is being made to characters off-stage at the time. The obvious and neutral choice, valid too for conference interpreters, is resorting to the substantive ("Has the decision been taken?"), though if one is sure that a character of uncertain gender, off-stage at the time, is involved, then the cheaper, all-purpose, double-gender "z" may also work in rapid dialogues in conjunction with an interrogative intonation: "z decided?".

The gender problem is treacherous. A French colleague working from the Italian sub-titles of a Scandinavian film was unfamiliar with the Christian name of a minor character whose intervention was announced in the sound-track and sub-titles. Bitte had made a series of proposals which my colleague had announced declaring "his" intentions. All well and good until Bitte arrived ostentatiously pregnant.

Sub-titles are frequently prepared in the film's country of origin with punctilious concern for precision of detail though less natural sense of language register, particularly where diminutives, augmentatives or pejoratives are concerned. An interpreter working from the Italian sub-titles of a Russian film (prepared in the Soviet Union) may be taken aback by the detailed (and possibly obsolete) terminology employed in describing materials or instruments, while it is by no means customary for an irate Italian father, after beating the living daylight out of his offspring, to address that hapless youth as "mascalzoncello". Art is not, however, science and the interpreter working from the Italian sub-

titles of a Russian film (as actually happened this summer in Venice, though he was a student of mine and had read my article on Linnaeus as a precursor of interpreting theory) obtained the exact effect required by translating "usignolo" as "song-bird". Only in an ornithological conference would he have been obliged to make a distinction between "nightingale", "reed-warbler", "mistle-thrush" or what have you. In that particular context, the nightingale had no scientific, Linnaean identity as "Luscinia Philomela" but a romantic, sylvan identity as the natural accompaniment of a rural love scene.

Context is, though, much more readily apparent in films than in written texts and when, for example, the proverbial cup of tea is offered, the interpreter will not be required to make the traditional language register distinctions between "Would you like a cup of tea?", "What would you say to a cup of tea?", "Wouldn't a cup of tea be super?" and "av' sum tea" as these social distinctions will be abundantly clear from costume and mimicry. "Tea?" with an interrogative intonation is the only minimal-disturbance alternative. A word of warning to those script or sub-title writers unfamiliar with the Scandinavian usage of "Tak". I have seen films in which tea has been offered, politely declined with "Tak" and the sub-titles have read "Sì, grazie" accompanied by no corresponding image to that effect.

The point is, surely, that not only must visual image and verbal comment coincide, but that anything which is made abundantly clear by the visual image need not be reinforced by the verbal comment, otherwise the interpreter is playing into the hands of the theatre critic of *L a Repubblica* and imposing his inflections upon the performer's, which it is not his task to do. A Turkish film this summer showed a prisoner drenched to the skin coming home to his wife. The sub-titles faithfully reflected the two stages of her reaction: surprise at his arrival and concern lest he catch cold and they read as follows: "Ma sei bagnato fradicio! Togliti i vestiti!". My contention is that it is superfluous for the interpreter to translate the first part of the sub-title, abundantly clear from the visual image of the dripping rain, the exclamatory intonation and the expression of the actress. "Take off your wet clothes!" is the type of synthesis to be aspired to. Similarly, an Indian film with long, slow rhythms about an imprisoned poet, reflective and taciturn, was only occasionally punctuated by dialogue. The text ran, when the warders brought the prisoner's food, "Non ho fame. Non voglio mangiare niente." accompanied by the traditional gesture of refusal. The music was particularly

poignant and any verbal intrusion beyond "I'm not hungry" or "No, thank you" would have interfered with the spectators' enjoyment of aspects of performance more significant than mere verbal information.

Rheme (new information not deducible from the context) must be clarified, theme need not (I would venture should not). This principle is surely valid with reference to any kind of simultaneous interpretation, though the elements combining to shed light on the theme are more abundantly and multifariously available in films than in speeches or papers. Exercise in this context enabling the interpreter to refine his sensitivity in conveying, in a minimum of words, the information necessary to the perception of a message of broader and deeper artistic impact may spare the listener the dreary impression, when he is unable directly to relate to the work of art, that he is being subjected, in Hamlet's phrase, to a meaningless and indiscriminating flow of "words, words, words!".