

Minority Languages and Film Subtitling: An Empirical Study Based on the Translation of Culture-bound Elements from Catalan into English

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Abstract

As the process of globalisation and the dominance of English as a world language expand, some regional and minority languages are becoming more marginalised due to the increasing perceived social and economic value of English and other major languages in the media. In the face of the challenges created by the globalisation process, this paper explores the translation of minority language films in the cinema industry, with special reference to the subtitling of Catalan-language films into English. The study focuses primarily on subtitling as the most common type of audiovisual translation (AVT) for this source material and enabling its distribution in the international market.

The corpus for this study comprises 14 Catalan films by the director Ventura Pons, together with their English-subtitled versions. Ventura Pons is considered one of the most internationally recognised directors of Catalan cinema today. In his films he strives to be a reference of the autochthonous culture and a signifier of cultural identity. Based on the data collected from the corpus, this study analyses the way in which the culture-bound elements (CBEs) encountered in Catalan films have been rendered from the source texts (STs) into the target texts (TTs) through the process of subtitling. For the purpose of analysis, the translation of CBEs was selected as the focal point of this study to examine the translation behaviour of subtitlers in response to the translation problem arising from the presence of numerous CBEs in the STs.

The paper investigates the translation techniques and overall strategies used in the rendering of CBEs by empirically exploring the connections among the following parameters: audiovisual constraints, interculturality, film genre, domain and translation techniques. More particularly, through a quantitative analysis of the results, the study aims to identify the most frequently recurring techniques and strategies used in such cases and to reveal symptomatic patterns of translation behaviour that may have been adopted when rendering the CBEs under study.

1. Introduction

The process of globalisation and the dominance of English as the language of international communication brought about by this process have led to debate over the tension between the need to promote a homogenised, generalising and singular society that is more accessible to all (Valero 2003: 715), and the preservation of the heterogeneity, diversity and differentiation implicit in local and regional cultures (Fishman 1991). In response to those who consider the globalisation process phenomenon as “generally synonymous with unidirectional Anglicisation, the dominance of the English language and Anglo-American culture at the expense of other languages and cultures” (Cronin 1996: 197), voices on the opposite side of the debate uphold “the pragmatic necessity for international and supra-cultural communication in a world which is growing ever smaller. And here, [...], English has assumed a hitherto unparalleled role as international lingua franca and world language” (Snell-Hornby 1996: 29).

Audiovisual media plays a predominant role in the spread of English as a language of international communication, due especially to the hegemonic position of the Hollywood-based film industry as the principal exporter of films in the international market. The privileged status English holds in the audiovisual industry, and its ideological and political implications, have been repeatedly highlighted by authors who denounce the monolithic nature of this situation: “as the US rules, so does English” (Gottlieb 2004: 85). In the context of the controversy arising from the advantageous position of English in the audiovisual market, this paper aims to explore the treatment of Catalan – as a minority language in the international audiovisual landscape, and in the film industry – in its translation into English, the majority language of communication within the audiovisual medium. To this end, the study analyses the rendering of a corpus of 14 Catalan films directed by Ventura Pons into English, specifically through subtitling, given that subtitling is the translation mode, and English is the language, in which these films are most frequently distributed and marketed in the international audiovisual context.

2. Study corpus

The translation of CBEs presented in this paper was analysed in a study

corpus of 14 films released between 1991 and 2010 made by the Catalan director Ventura Pons. Commercial copies of these films on DVD format were used. This particular study corpus was chosen as it provides film material shot in Catalan in its original version with the option of subtitles in English and, because the original versions are also notable for their distinct cultural traits.

Within the field of Catalan cinema, Ventura Pons is widely considered to be the most translated and internationally marketed Catalan film director (Yáñez 2006). He is also a director who, throughout his film career, has shown a particular interest in acting as an ambassador of Catalan culture, especially through his film adaptations of outstanding works of Catalan playwrights and novelists, such as Josep M. Benet i Jornet, Sergi Belbel, Lluïsa Cunillé, Quim Monzó, Lluís Anton Baulenas, Joan Barberó, Ferran Torrent and Jordi Puntí. The fact that Ventura Pons chose to use the works of these Catalan authors in his adaptations gives these films a special value as clear exemplars of autochthonous culture and as exponents of Catalan national identity (Zatlin 2007: 434). This study corpus therefore lends itself to an analysis of the translation problem arising both from the numerous CBEs in these Catalan films, and in transferring the expression of diverse cultural manifestations from the source system (SS) to the target system (TS) within the specific Catalan-English language pair.

The corpus is comprised of the following films:

- 1- *Què t'hi jugues, Mari Pili* (1991)
- 2- *El perquè de tot plegat* (1994)
- 3- *Actrius* (1996)
- 4- *Carícies* (1997)
- 5- *Amic/amat* (1998)
- 6- *Morir (o no)* (1999)
- 7- *Anita no perd el tren* (2000)
- 8- *Amor idiota* (2004)
- 9- *La vida abismal* (2006)
- 10- *Animals ferits* (2006)
- 11- *Barcelona (un mapa)* (2007)
- 12- *Forasters* (2008)
- 13- *A la deriva* (2009)
- 14- *Mil cretins* (2010)

3. The translation of Culture-Bound Elements

In order to identify the way Catalan is treated in this media context and the translation practices that have developed when rendering these films into the target culture (TC), the study focuses on the translation of CBEs found in these Catalan films. By assessing the analysis of how these elements are translated, we attempt to identify the specific translation solutions that subtitlers have adopted to deal with a particular translation problem consisting of certain CBEs in Catalan films that could present problems of understanding or inaccessibility for the TC audience. The specific translation solutions subtitlers choose when dealing with these elements allow us to appraise the practices that prevail in the translation process and to gauge the importance given to the various alternatives available to the translator to solve this particular problem.

CBEs, the plurality of concepts and denominations associated with them, the lack of consensus on the use of nomenclature, and the arbitrary way in which they are categorised are all factors that have been analysed in depth by various authors and theoretical approaches (Franco 1996: 57). We therefore leave aside the conceptual and terminological debate that this issue might arouse, and in order to identify and select the examples discussed in this paper, for practical purposes, I follow the definition and the criteria proposed by Jan Pedersen in his studies on the translation of *Extralinguistic Cultural References* (ECRs):

Extralinguistic Cultural Reference (ECR) is defined as reference that is attempted by means of any cultural linguistic expression, which refers to an extralinguistic entity or process. The referent of the said expression may prototypically be assumed to be identifiable to a relevant audience as this referent is within the encyclopaedic knowledge of this audience (Pedersen 2011: 43).

Following this definition and criteria, a total number of 133 CBEs were identified in the study corpus. Some examples of these source text (ST) elements and of the translation offered in the target text (TT) are:

- Cremaet de rom (ST) [Catalan hot drink made with rum, coffee and spices] rum (TT)
(*La vida abismal*, 1.15.46)
- Canelons de Sant Esteve (ST) [Catalan pasta dish eaten on the 26th December, St. Esteve's Day] Barcelonian cannelloni (TT)
(*Anita no perd el tren*, 10.04)

L'Estació de França (ST) [the second busiest railway station in Barcelona and a distinctive sample of Catalan modernist architecture] →the old train station (TT) (*Barcelona, un mapa*, 59.35)

Els Mossos (ST) [Mossos d'Esquadra, police force of Catalonia and the oldest civil police force in Europe] →the police (TT) (*A la deriva*, 23.38)

- Coca de Sant Joan (ST) [typical Catalan sweet pastry eaten on St. John's Eve] Midsummer's cake (TT)
(*A la deriva*, 1.19.00)

4. Methodology

The model of analysis used in this study is a descriptive model based on the theoretical proposals put forward by Toury (1980, 1995). This model follows an inductive (bottom-up) method that first analyses the TT and then contrasts it with the ST in order to identify translation patterns that reveal possible translation norms, as defined and categorised by Toury (1995: 54).

4.1. Macrotextual dimension of the analysis

The analytical model applied in the study consists of two dimensions: the macrotextual and the microtextual dimensions. The macrotextual dimension incorporates the factors considered to be external to the audiovisual text which, due to their prominence, may have determined the translation of the CBEs encountered in the study corpus. This dimension encompasses the factors that are generally associated with the preliminary phase of the translation and in the case of this study, are reflected by the preliminary norms and the genre of the films included in the corpus.

4.1.1. Preliminary norms parameter

As part of the analysis of the preliminary norms of the translation, the study included factors related to the various types of professional conventions that affect the translation (Toury 1995: 58), to the relationship between the ST and the TT (Chesterman 1997: 69), or to the role of the audience for whom the translation is intended (Chesterman 1997: 64; Rabadán 1991: 136). A questionnaire was designed and addressed to the subtitling companies who translated these films (Láser

Film, S.A. and Bandaparte S.A.) with questions related to subtitling and subtitling conventions, the professional situation (financial remuneration, deadlines, acknowledgment, etc.), and questions related to the translation of CBEs (specific guidelines, the target audience, etc.).

However, the subtitling companies were unable to provide any useful information, and so no information related to the impact of the preliminary norms parameter has been included in this analysis.

4.1.2. Film genre parameter

The film genre parameter is designed to evaluate the impact that a particular film genre has on the translation of CBEs. The close relationship that exists between film genres and translation solutions applied to CBEs has been highlighted by authors such as Nedergaard-Larsen (1993), Gottlieb (2009) and Pedersen (2011). In this vein, one of the objectives of this study was to assess the relevance of film genres and their primordial function or *skopos* in the translation of CBEs.

The films directed by Ventura Pons analysed in this study were classified as belonging to the genres of drama (7) or comedy (7), following the classification in the Spanish Ministry of Culture certified film database.¹

The following is an example of a CBE detected in the study corpus that was translated differently in a comedy and in a drama:

- Sagrada Família (ST) → Gaudi's masterpiece (Generalisation)²
(*Anita no perd el tren*, 01.09.38, comedy)
- Sagrada Família (ST) → Sagrada Família (Repetition)
(*Barcelona, un mapa*, 11.36, drama)

In the analysis, I also identified that the number of CBEs that were detected in films categorised as comedy was significantly larger (51 out of 81) than the number found in drama films (30 out of 81). A clear distinction was also identified between the techniques applied to CBEs. When they appeared in comedy films, generalisation was used in 24 examples out of 81, while repetition was used in only 13 cases. Following

¹<http://www.mcu.es/bbddpeliculas/cargarFiltro.do?layout=bbddpeliculas&cache=init&language=es>

² The categories of translation techniques used in this paper are based on the taxonomies proposed by Franco (1996) and (Pedersen (2011), and have been classified according to their orientation towards either the source system, or the target system, as will be explained in section 4.4.4.

Franco (1966), 'repetition' retains the reference (Pederson's 'retention'), or remains as close to the original reference as possible. In drama films the strategy reversed: 13 examples of repetition vs. 7 examples of generalisation.

4.2. Microtextual dimension of analysis

The second of the dimensions in the model of analysis covers the factors related to the translation phase itself and consists of parameters that could be determined, to a large extent, by the microtextual character of the audiovisual texts in the study corpus. The following parameters are included in this dimension: the degree of interculturality of the CBEs, audiovisual constraints that affect them, the domains to which the examples of the CBEs in the corpus belong, and translation techniques used to translate them.

4.2.1. Interculturality parameter

The interculturality parameter focusses on the relationship between the degree of familiarity that a CBE belonging to the source culture (SC) has for the target culture (TC) audience, and the solutions applied, according to the degree of familiarity with the CBE the target audience is assumed to have. The CBEs were classified and analysed according to their degree of familiarity for the target audience in line with the following three levels proposed by Pedersen (2011: 107-108):

a) Transcultural CBE: an element not bound to the SC, but which should be retrievable from common encyclopaedic knowledge of the ST and the TT audiences.

b) Monocultural CBE: an element which causes a translation problem, as its referent will be less identifiable to the TT audience than it is to the ST audience.

c) Infracultural CBE: an element *not* typically bound to, or identifiable with, either the SC or the TC audience because of its specialised or local nature.

The following are examples of CBEs that were categorised according to these three levels of interculturality:

LEVELS OF INTERCULTURALITY	
TRANSCULTURAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frank Capra, • La Bohème, • l'Interpol
MONOCULTURAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ramon Llull • el Passeig de Gràcia • la paella de senyoret
INFRACULTURAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Àngel • el tiet Toni • el bar Wonder

Figure 1. Levels of interculturality.

Although all three levels of interculturality were identified in the CBEs, only data referring to monocultural elements were taken into account, since the specific nature of this cultural element type poses the translation problem of how to overcome the intercultural barriers. The translations require deliberately considered choices, which may indicate the underlying use of translation norms. In all, 81 monocultural elements from a total of 133 examples of CBEs identified in the corpus were used in the analysis.

4.2.2. Audiovisual constraints parameter

Within the microtextual dimension I also assessed the influence that the specific characteristics of the audiovisual texts have on the translation of this set of CBEs. They all affect and, in some cases significantly limit, the transfer of information. Such limitations are commonly known as *constraints* in the area of AVT (Titford, 1982). I specifically analysed the semiotic constraints; those that emerge as a result of the interplay between verbal and non-verbal information and include most of the codes of meaning that make up the semantic network of an audiovisual text (Chaume 2004: 155).

In the study corpus, I identified a significant number of semiotic constraint CBEs (20 out of 81). For example, the translation offered for the Catalan city *Salou*, a beach resort (*Anita no perd el tren*, 08.54), is *the beach* in the TT. This maintains the connexion between the images of the beach where Anita goes for a stroll and the translation of the CBE that is offered in the English subtitles (*the beach*).

In the examples affected by semiotic constraints (16), the constraint

was identified as the display on the screen of the iconic representation of the CBE that was simultaneously mentioned in the original version of the Catalan films. In these cases, repetition is the most frequently used technique (8 examples). These all preserve the semiotic cohesion between the visual and the linguistic channels.

Together with the semiotic constraints, I identified some isochronic constraints, the result of spatial and temporal limitations specific to subtitling. Subtitles have to keep temporal synchrony with the utterances and rhythm of the original film. As a consequence of the presence of these isochronic constraints, subtitlers are forced to limit the amount of information included in the TT to match subtitle display time with the oral-visual expression that the viewers follow in the original. An example would be the Catalan city *Reus* (*El perquè de tot plegat*, 31.39), which is mentioned in a fast-paced dialogue in the ST and which has been omitted in the TT to preserve the spatial and temporal parameters. In the study corpus, 4 examples of CBEs affected by isochronic constraints were identified. These were omitted on a regular basis in the TT (3 examples out of 4).

4.3.3. Domain parameter

The third parameter in the microtextual dimension, domain, examines the relationship between the typology of the CBEs and the translation solutions associated with each one of them. This factor is undoubtedly one of the issues in the translation of CBEs that has received most attention in translation studies. However, given the difficulty of categorising these elements, and the degree of ambiguity that can arise as a result, in this study I propose a classification of the CBEs that departs from the classic taxonomy model of a hierarchical map of concepts covering inclusive and exclusive relationships; rather, I propose an extensional classification offering a list of its components. The categories included in this classification were kept open so as to facilitate its application to the specific characteristics of the corpus. This domain classification proposal was drawn up from all the examples of CBEs identified in the study corpus and consists of the domains included in the following figure:

DOMAIN	1. NAMES	1.1. Personal names
		1.2. Geographical names
		1.3. Institutions and organisations
		1.4. Commercial brands
	2. FOOD AND DRINK	
	3. LITERATURE	
	4. CINEMA	
	5. ART	
	6. MUSIC	
	7. HISTORY	
	8. EDUCATION	
	9. COMMERCE	
	10. SPORT	
	11. LEISURE	
	12. ARCHITECTURE AND TOWN PLANNING	12.1. Cultural buildings
12.2. Social buildings		
12.3. Education centres		
12.4. Urban spaces		
13. CURRENCIES		
14. OTHERS		

Figure 2. Domain classification.

In the analysis, I identified significant differences in the translation solutions applied by subtitlers depending on the domain to which the CBE belongs. Thus, CBEs from the domain 'Food and Drink' are translated almost exclusively (20 examples out of 29) by generalisation (garrinets celestials [flan-like dessert] □ cheesecake), whereas CBEs belonging to the domain 'Art', 'Literature' or 'History' tend to be repeated in the TT (7 examples out of 9).

4.4.4. Translation techniques parameter

As with the study of the categorisation of CBEs, AVT translation techniques have been widely explored in translation studies. A comprehensive review of the theoretical and practical contributions in this field goes beyond the scope of the present article and, therefore, only one the classification of translation techniques used in this corpus is presented here. This classification was carried out using a model adapted from those

proposed by Franco (1996) and Pedersen (2011).

The classification used in this study adopts a bipolar format, which I term Source System (SS) Orientation and Target System (TS) Orientation. Translation techniques were graded according to their orientation towards either the SS, or the TS. The model has a total of ten translation techniques along a continuum bounded by two poles: the SS pole on the left and TS pole on the right. This classification and the location of the techniques between the two poles are shown in the following figure:

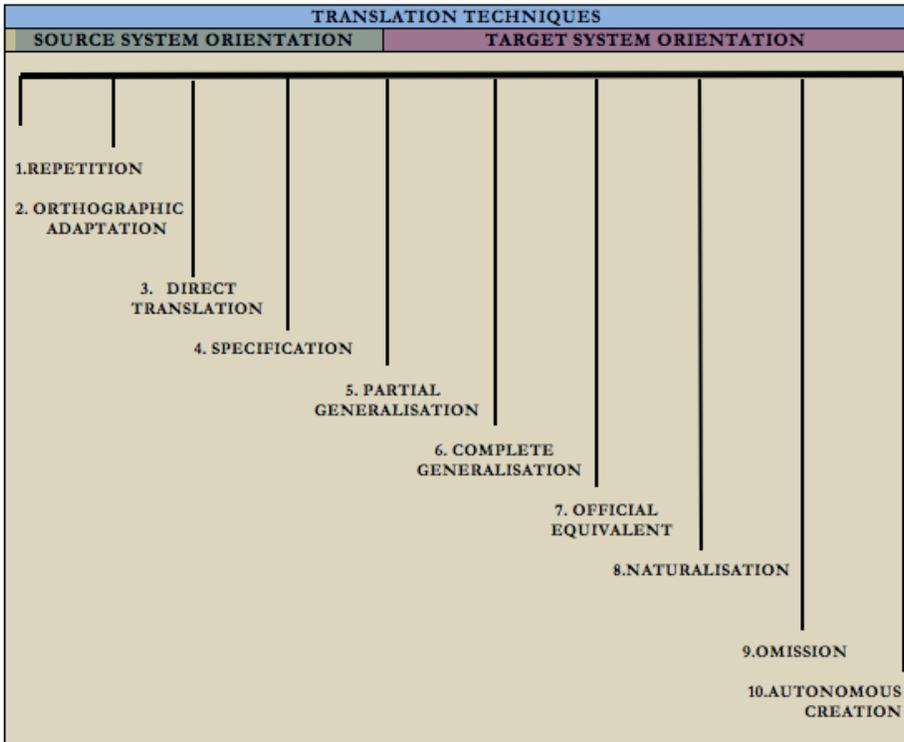


Figure 2. Translation techniques parameter.

5. Results

The overall results for the use of translation techniques and their location on the ST-TT orientation continuum are provided in the figure below:

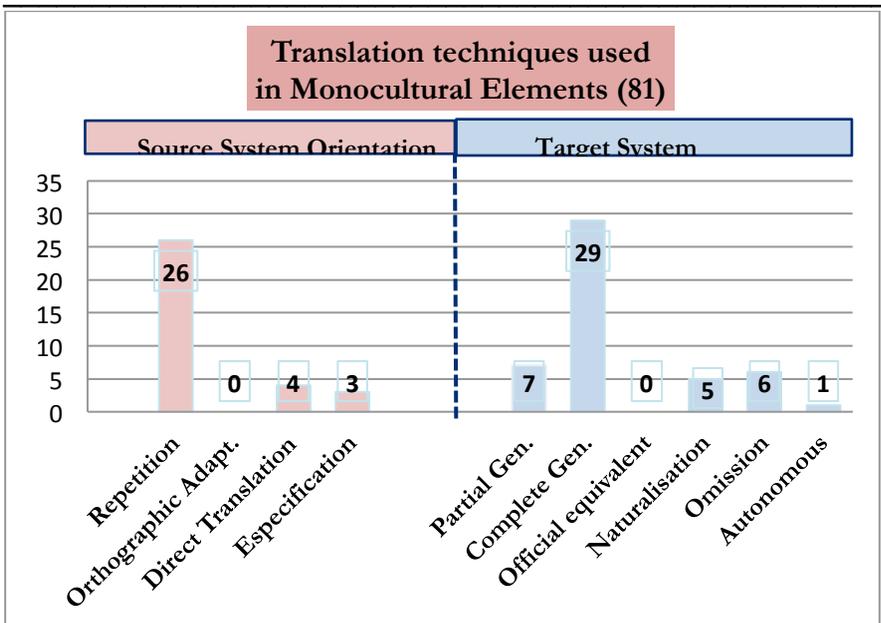


Figure 3. Translation techniques used in Monocultural Elements.

The location of the various translation techniques within this bipolar model allows us to identify the strategic framework in which the translator works when providing translation solutions for the CBEs in this study corpus. In the first case, the predominance of SS oriented techniques could be considered to indicate a preference for foreignising translation solutions, which tend to retain elements from the SS; whereas in the second case, the predominance of techniques oriented towards the TS, or familiarising solutions, could reflect a systematic attempt to integrate the translation within the conventions of the TS.

The overall results of the analysis of the examples of translated CBEs based on the parameters of analysis are shown in the following figure:

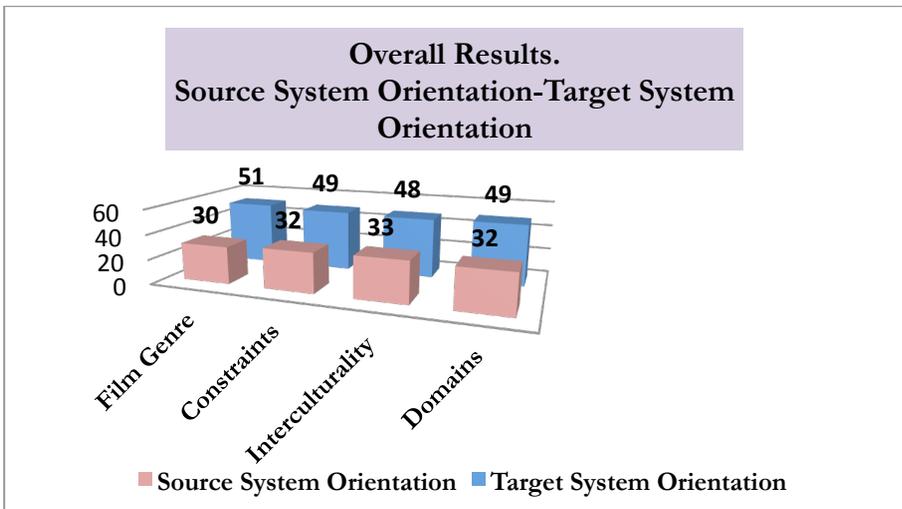


Figure 4. Overall results of technique orientation by parameters.

The overall results of the joint analysis of these parameters reveal a striking predominance of TS oriented techniques in all the parameters analysed. Analysis of the set of techniques used by the subtitler also provides useful information on the type of translation method followed when translating CBEs into the TTs (Hurtado Albir 2001: 241).

These overall data suggest that, where determining factors exist that can affect the translation of CBEs, the method translators tend to use is clearly oriented towards the TC. These results are in line with the findings of similar research projects, such as Gottlieb's (2009) analysis of the translation of cultural-references in film subtitling from Danish into English. In his study, a significant difference in the use of translation techniques was identified depending on whether the cultural references were translated from English to Danish, with more than half of these references translated in their original form (repetition); or from Danish into English, with techniques such as generalisation and substitution being used to translate more than half of these elements (Gottlieb 2009: 38).

6. Conclusions

This paper has analysed the translation of CBEs from Catalan to English in the subtitling mode of AVT. This analysis was based on a set of parameters that are considered likely to have a significant influence on the

translation of CBEs identified in the films included in the corpus. The joint analysis of these parameters allows the researcher to evaluate the synergy of factors that have influenced the translation of CBEs and helps identify possible translation norms underlying the translation practices applied in this corpus. These parameters were explored within two specific dimensions, the macrotextual dimension, which includes preliminary norms and genre parameters; and the microtextual dimension, in which the parameters of interculturality, constraints, translation techniques and domains were analysed.

The results of this study reveal, that irrespective of the parameter analysed and its relevance to the translation process, the translation of the CBEs rendered in the English subtitled version of the films in the corpus is heavily oriented towards the TS. Both the translation techniques and the translation method employed favour the integration of the translation within the TS. This type of translator behaviour highlights the principles that often govern the translation of this type of audiovisual text and, as authors such as Delabastita (1990: 99) have highlighted, “Film translation is not just a matter of language conversion, and the actual reality of film translation is conditioned to a large extent by the functional needs of the receiving culture and not, or not just, by the demands made by the source films”.

However, it is worth asking whether the functional requirements of the TC to which Delabastita alludes, and refers to in assessing the role of the preliminary translation norms parameter, may vary, or change, as a result of additional factors, such as the position of the TC and the SC within the international audiovisual market, the degree of prestige enjoyed by the SC in this field, and whether it is perceived as coming from a peripheral culture, as part of a “minor culture” and, therefore, less likely to arouse the interest of an international audience (Delabastita 1990: 102). Some measures designed to limit the predominance of English in audiovisual media and promote the use of minority languages in this sphere have already been proposed by authors such as Gottlieb who advocates a “Utopian situation” in which “importing more programmes from non-anglophone countries will boost people’s linguistic and cultural awareness and help keep the dominance of English in check” (Gottlieb 2004: 94).

Although an exploration of the ideological and political implications of the translation practices and translation method identified in this research does not fall within the central aim of this study, the final aim of the descriptive research presented here is necessarily linked to the evaluation

of the type of ideological, cultural or sociolinguistic phenomena that may underlie the repeated use of this particular translator behaviour. The analysis presented here is methodologically essential to identify the translation patterns and reiterated choices, but this analysis is not an end in itself; rather it is an initial step towards exploring the reasons underlying the behaviour patterns and recurring translation strategies that have been highlighted in this paper. The identification of these motives would facilitate, with greater certainty and accuracy, the formulation of translation norms that help identify or predict similar translation models developed within specific cultural systems.

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