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Imagined spectators: the importance of policy for audiovisual translation research

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Abstract

This article considers theoretical and methodological questions of language and translation policy in the dissemination of audiovisual products across languages. This is an area where scholarly research is inevitably playing catch-up with rapid change both in the language industries and in film and television production. For example, we have a general sense of 'dubbing territories' and 'subtitling territories' but in reality the picture is more complex. Norms changed in the course of the home entertainment revolution, with the arrival of the DVD format in the late 1990s ostensibly increasing viewer choice and flexibility of translation provision. The relocation of much audiovisual material to an online environment has also generated fundamental changes in the way that works circulate, with volunteer translators and automated translation processes playing a larger role. Policy developments in access translation have meant that there have also been great changes relatively recently in the availability of SDH subtitling, audio description and other modes of access translation. This is a very broad field which raises many compelling research questions. At the same time, its very breadth does not lend itself to a comprehensive overview. The article will therefore aim to provide an orientation to, rather than a summary of, the theoretical and methodological challenges of research on this topic.

Keywords: translation policy, audiovisual translation, dubbing, subtitling, norms

1. Introduction: what is audiovisual translation policy?

Translation policy exists in a rather fuzzy state within Translation Studies. As Reine Meylaerts points out in her entry on the topic in the John Benjamins *Handbook of Translation Studies* (2011), it has not been a traditional focus of research in the area, although it is present in the work of foundational figures in the discipline including James Holmes, José Lambert and Gideon Toury. In a 2002 review of Peter France's *Oxford Guide to Literature in English*

Translation, Dirk Delabastita identifies policy as an area where there are gaps in coverage (Delabastita 2002, 162). In 2006, Yves Gambier observed in an overview of the state of the art in audiovisual translation (AVT) research that “demeurent encore sous-estimés les rapports entre politique linguistique, statut des langues et choix du doublage” [the relationships between language policy, language status and choice of dubbing are still understudied] (2006, 275);¹ his overview of subtitling in the same article (274) gives a list of current areas of research from which policy is conspicuous by its absence. In the intervening decade the situation has improved to some extent, as we will see below.

One of the issues in talking about ‘translation policy’ is how to define its scope. James S Holmes, in his paper “The Name and Nature of Translation Studies” (first delivered in 1972), sees translation policy as part of applied Translation Studies:

The task of the translator in this area is to render informed advice to others in defining the place and role of translators, translating, and translations in society at large: such questions, for instance, as determining what works need to be translated in a given socio-cultural situation, what the social and economic position of the translator is and should be, or [...] what part translating should play in the teaching and learning of foreign languages. (Holmes 2000, 182)

Holmes’ focus is on the translator as expert professional, rather than on the researcher, and on the impact of research outside the academy, rather than on translation policy as an object of research. However, since then, much policy-related research has developed along descriptive rather than applied lines; according to Jeremy Munday (2008, 12), ‘translation policy’ would “nowadays far more likely be related to the ideology, including language policy and hegemony, that determines translation.”

In recent Translation Studies the restricted definition of policy as “the conduct of political and public affairs by a government or an administration, i.e. [...] political or public practices as implemented in legal rules” (Meylaerts 2011) co-exists with a more general usage which sees norms and translation policy as being on a continuum in relation to each other. José Lambert adopts a broad concept of translation policy in assuming ‘that the institutional frame within which translations [and other transfer channels between languages] operate has an impact on the translation (transfer) strategy’ (1994, 23). One of the recurrent

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

issues in policy research is whether specific policies can be found in written form. As Maisa Nakkula observes in a 1996 article on subtitling on Finnish television, “la décision de principe, stable, continue, pour tel ou tel mode de conversion linguistique est rarement explicitée: en général, une politique de traduction se forme peu à peu” [the stable, lasting decision in favour of one or another mode of translation is rarely made explicit: in general, a translation policy forms gradually] (1996, 101).

Gideon Toury explicitly links norms and policy through the idea of preliminary norms. For Toury, translation policy is constituted by

those factors that govern the choice of text types; or even of individual texts, to be imported through translation into a particular culture/language at a particular point in time. *Such a policy will be said to exist inasmuch as the choice is found to be non-random.* Different policies may of course apply to different subgroups, in terms of either text-types (e.g. literary vs. non-literary) or human agents and groups thereof (e.g. different publishing houses), and the interface between the two often offers very fertile grounds for policy hunting. (Toury 1995, 58; emphasis added)

This approach has been picked up by many subsequent researchers.² This article will look both at “public practices as implemented in legal rules” and at research which takes its lead from Descriptive Translation Studies in extrapolating policies and norms.

The choice of texts and text types, of course, also involves choices about source language. Target-language policies seem to have more visibility than source-language-oriented policies. A key area is translation into minority languages (Agost 2004; Moal 2013; O’Connell 1994, 2000; Vandekerckhove, De Houwer and Remael 2009). O’Connell (1994, 371) identifies three functions of minority language subtitling:

- (a) language maintenance/language planning;
- (b) language revival/promotion;
- (c) fulfillment of broadcasting obligation while attracting as large an audience as possible.

² For instance, in her entry on “Editorial Policy” in the John Benjamins *Handbook of Translation Studies*, Gisèle Sapiro (2012, 32) observes that “these policies, which are partly conscious and partly unconscious, can be reconstructed on the basis of archives, interviews and a quantitative analysis of publishers’ lists or of the table of contents of journals, through which the coherence and evolution of these policies can be observed.”

In this field, we see a combination of empirical research on the reception of AVT in minority or regional language contexts (e.g., Vandekerckhove, De Houwer and Remael 2009, von Flotow 2009) and work explicitly aimed at informing policy (e.g., O’Connell 1994). An excellent historical study is Gabrielle Chomentowski’s comprehensive account, published in 2014, of language and translation policy in Soviet cinema in the late silent and early sound era, which shows how the many languages of the Soviet peoples posed a problem for Soviet cinematographic production and for the execution of government policy, partly because the attitude of the government to language maintenance and language revival changed over the period under study.

In the workflows of globalization and localization, ‘policy’ may also include such configurations of target languages as DVD language menus; for instance, the inclusion of French and Spanish subtitles on Region 1 DVDs prepared for the North American market (Durovicová 2010, 110-111). As Minako O’Hagan (2007, 162) observes, although DVD theoretically allows for a large number of translations to be included, “this capability is restricted by the region coding and the decisions made on region-specific translation versions.” Although the importance of the DVD medium for AVT research has been widely acknowledged (e.g., O’Hagan 2007), Durovicová is one of very few to have addressed the theoretical and political implications of language policy on DVD. Target language choices such as those on a DVD menu contribute to the construction of an ‘imagined community’ in the sense in which Benedict Anderson uses it (Anderson 1991). The use of Spanish as well as French on Region 1 DVDs, which belies the fact that Spanish is not an official language of any country in Region 1, “surely reflects the demographic and commercial realities within the officially monolingual United States” (Durovicová 2010, 111). DVD is a fruitful area for research in translation policy, though it is being rapidly superseded by other platforms including streaming video. As this article was in preparation, I came across a promotional video on the web for the 2013 Disney animated feature *Frozen*.³ The video featured a montage of twenty-five recordings in twenty-five different languages of the song “Let It Go.” The twenty-five languages were English, German, Mandarin, Swedish, Japanese, Polish, Hungarian, Catalan, Italian, Korean, Serbian, Cantonese, Portuguese, Bahasa Malaysia, Russian, Danish, Bulgarian, Norwegian, Thai, Flemish, Dutch and two versions of French

³ At the time of writing the video can be found under the title ‘Disney’s Frozen - “Let It Go” Multi-Language Full Sequence’ on the Walt Disney Animation Studios Youtube channel at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OC83NA5tAGE> (last accessed 29 February 2016).

(from France and Canada) and Spanish (Castilian and Latin American). This language selection raised a number of interesting questions. On what basis are dubbing languages identified by a huge multinational such as Disney? On the basis of size of territory? Or on the basis of cinema infrastructure and GDP? What other languages does Disney routinely use as localizing languages? In fact, it later became clear that the film had been fully dubbed with voice casting for the singing in fully forty-one languages (Keegan 2014).⁴ This compares with some 15 target languages for the major release *The Lion King* in 1994 (ibid.). This growth in globalized translation flows indicates some of the ways in which thinking about translation policy can open up research in AVT and encourage interdisciplinary research, for instance, with film and media studies. The choice to leverage the studio's translation policies as a way of publicizing the film is also potentially of significance both for the visibility of AVT and for our understanding of the complex relationships between translation and the international circulation of film.

2. Dubbing or subtitling?

One of the major preoccupations of research within AVT has been the identification of specific territories with particular forms of AVT which has implicitly always been a question of policy. Traditionally (see, e.g., Dries 1996; Gottlieb 1998), the geography of AVT has been mapped as a combination of dubbing territories (traditionally, French, German, Italian and Spanish-speaking countries); subtitling territories (generally smaller language markets such as Greece, the Netherlands, the Scandinavian countries); voiceover territories (including Russia and Poland), and exporting territories (the English-speaking nations which are overwhelmingly net exporters of audiovisual products). But this handy taxonomy hides great complexity, notably, different policies for theatrically exhibited film and for television. Delia Chiaro (2009) and Henrik Gottlieb (2012) both underline the complexity of the audiovisual map. Gottlieb (2012, 45) outlines a range of “usage scenarios” for AVT, taking into account that individual territories often have more than one potential target language; that territories may be subtitling from and into languages both of which are ‘domestic’ languages; or that access forms of AVT also have to be taken into account. His survey is not systematic, but points to the maturity of this field of research, in that we now have a more granular

⁴ I am indebted to Jayne Fox for drawing this article to my attention.

understanding of the factors at issue in descriptive studies of translation policy. Chiaro (2009, 143-144) supports this view that the AVT ‘map’ is both complex and dynamic, pointing out, for instance, that subtitling is in rapid expansion, even in dubbing territories, due to changes in broadcast technology and market pressure for simultaneous release of audiovisual products across multiple territories.

A key moment for policy in audiovisual translation, and one which is increasingly well documented, is the coming of sound to cinema in the late 1920s. This raised a number of policy issues, notably, the strategies adopted by the major film producing nations for the circulation of their products overseas; and the policies of importing nations whose film industries were potentially threatened by imported film, particularly from Hollywood (Maltby and Vasey 1994). Much of what was initially written on Hollywood’s response to the coming of sound focused on the multilingual versions of 1929-1931, but there have also been important recent territory-specific studies on the development of dubbing and/or subtitling such as Chomentowski (2014), Cornu (2014), de Luna Freire (2015) and Mereu (2013).

One of the early questions asked by audiovisual Translation Studies was *why* specific countries chose to opt for dubbing or subtitling. Martine Danan (1991) offered an influential theoretical overview, namely that dubbing was characteristic of “a strong nationalistic system” which “tends to be closed and reject or limit outside influences” (612). Subtitling, on the other hand, “indirectly promotes the use of a foreign language as an everyday function in addition to creating an interest in a foreign culture”; it therefore “corresponds to a weaker system open to foreign influences” (613). This view is still very widely accepted, given the compelling evidence of the right-wing repressive European regimes of the mid-twentieth century. It cannot, however, be seen as monolithically applicable to all contexts. For example, Gabrielle Chomentowski (2014, 309) reports that subtitling

est privilégié en URSS jusqu’en 1938, à la fois pour des considérations financières, pratiques et idéologiques (le contenu des sous-titres semble aux autorités plus facile à contrôler que le doublage, dans lequel celui qui double peut user d’intonations plus ou moins expressives) [is the preferred mode in the USSR until 1938, at once for financial, practical and ideological reasons (the content of the subtitles seems to the authorities easier to control than dubbing, in which the dubbing actor can use more or less expressive intonations)].⁵

⁵ Unfortunately, Chomentowski does not provide a reference for this observation.

In his recent work *Audiovisual Translation: Theories, Methods and Issues*, Luis Pérez González transmits an apparently well-known example of an abrupt change in translation policy under the Soeharto regime in Indonesia in 1996. Having issued a decree that dubbing should henceforth replace subtitling in foreign films broadcast on television, the government reversed this decision a few months later on the grounds that viewers were too prone to identify with dubbed films:

Wherever Indonesians view television, films or other broadcasts where the original language has been changed into our national language, those Indonesians will think that the performances in those media constitute a part of themselves. As if the culture behind those performances is also the culture of our people. (quoted in Pérez González 2014, 22)

This supports the view that there is a greater diversity of motivations underlying national policies than Danan's formulation may initially suggest. Although there is compelling evidence that "dubbing was often the result of an overt governmental policy in a nationalistic environment" (Danan 1991, 611), we must also recognize very strong protectionist and financial incentives for dubbing, inasmuch as insisting on dubbing being done in the target language territory helped to safeguard jobs in the film industry; on the Italian context, for instance, see Mereu (2013, 17-20) and Redi (2014, 402).

3. Methods

As with other areas of audiovisual translation studies, a small-scale case study methodology focusing on linguistic comparisons has often been adopted. Many studies have extrapolated policies from data readily available, consistent with Lambert's suggestion (1988, 131) that "dominant rules in translational policy might be observed in the language(s) used by mass media." Important early collections involving extensive descriptive work providing an overview of implicit or explicit policies include Gambier (1996) and Gambier and Gottlieb (2001).

Archival research methods have assumed an increasingly important profile in researching the area of policy. The TRACE project in Spain, which had a basically

descriptive methodology with a strong focus on textual comparison, and which included strands on cinema and television, also drew for context on the very rich AGA (Archivo General de la Administración) archives to look at censors' reports as representative of the impact of policy on the production of translations. And of course it is not only target-language censorship which has an impact on screen translation; the films of Billy Wilder, for instance, which have been considered by Jeroen Vandaele (2015), were already affected by the Hollywood Production Code at the production stage. Source-culture contextual factors could have an explicit as well as implicit impact on translation choices, inasmuch as, in Spain for instance, the rating given to a film by the Legion of Decency may have affected the decision as to whether or not to subject it to prior censorship (Camus Camus 2008, 77-78; Garnemark 2013).

Reception studies are also important as a way of establishing the impact of media policies and potentially as a way of guiding future policy. Vandekerckhove, De Houwer and Remael (2009) conducted a large-scale research project with viewers across Flemish-speaking Belgium to understand issues around subtitling and regional language varieties. This data was quantitatively presented.

A further example of an empirical study, on the production side this time, is Alfaro de Carvalho's (2012) qualitative study on language control policies in television subtitling which gathers data from professionals in the sector. This study illustrates an important issue in this kind of empirical research which is that data held by major operators in the audiovisual field such as broadcasters and distributors may be commercially sensitive and their legal departments may block attempts to access this data (Alfaro de Carvalho 2012, 474). A more pragmatic, but equally relevant, issue for such research is that even where access is possible, for instance, through archival holdings, broadcasters and distributors may not keep records in a form which is helpful to researchers. In his account of a research project into the dubbing of Japanese anime into Afrikaans on SABC in South Africa in the last years of apartheid, Cobus van Staden (2014, 5) relates how he failed to locate a key document, containing their new editorial language policy, released by the SABC in 1995; it did not seem to be in the broadcaster's own archive.

Practitioner research has always been an important element of audiovisual translation studies; many of the early researchers in AVT were themselves professional subtitlers or dubbing scriptwriters (Helene Reid, Robert Paquin and many others) and this tradition continues (on the question of translation policy see e.g. Paquin 2000; Alfaro de Carvalho 2012; Artegiani and Kapsaskis 2014; Cornu 2014). Practitioners have the marked advantage

for policy research of having access to valuable primary documents as well as to observational experience of policies in use.

Of course, many projects combine archival elements, textual comparison, a practitioner perspective, and/or empirical methods.

It is worth noting that important research into translation policy takes place outside the university environment. Lucy Mazdon and Catherine Wheatley (2013, 149-50) describe a 1970 survey carried out by the magazine *Films and Filming* which asked distributors whether they could envisage playing both dubbed and subtitled prints of films in the cinema. The problem, in a net exporting nation where almost all films shown were in English, was that in any given region, audiences were very unlikely to be large enough to support the circulation of films in more than one format. Distributors were divided on the acceptability to audiences of the two modes of translation (particularly dubbing). In practice, both dubbed and subtitled prints have circulated in the UK: dubbed prints particularly in rural areas, subtitled prints in metropolitan centres. A more recent small-scale 2010 survey of cinemagoers at UK cinemas showing dubbed and subtitled prints of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (OTX and UKFC 2010) concludes that both dubbed and subtitled prints are required to maximise audiences for foreign-language film in the UK.

4. Future directions and challenges

This section seeks to outline the implications of what has been said above for future research in AVT policies. It does so for convenience under a series of headings.

- a) **Broadcast medium:** Although much of the early work on AVT was done on films, when it comes to thinking about AVT policy, television is perhaps the most important medium, regulated as it is by national requirements and stipulations.⁶ These include issues around access forms of translation: making a specific proportion of broadcast content available with subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing, sign language interpreting and audio description. See, for instance, the 2015 Ofcom guidelines in the UK, which stipulate that for most television channels, 5% of material must be signed, 10% audio described, and 80% subtitled. They also include certain guidelines around minority languages (cf.

⁶ For Ofcom regulations on the requirements on UK broadcasters, see Ofcom (2015).

O’Connell 1994, Mac Dubhghaill 2006) and may also have implications for public literacy (Pearson 2006). As a medium which reaches a more general audience than either films exhibited theatrically or films on DVD, television may also be held to different standards of decorum and different definitions of acceptability (Morgan 2001, Alfaro de Carvalho 2012). Where streaming video fits in this landscape has yet to be thoroughly researched. Current technological developments in television which will use smart technology to make television even more responsive to individual viewers (Hughes et al. 2015) are also likely to require new research questions and methods.

- b) **Region coverage:** There are many gaps in coverage of policies. Some languages have been fairly well covered; others hardly at all. Taking the broader view of policies as emerging from observation of practice, for instance, the tradition of the lektor [voice-over actor] in Poland, for instance, has been little touched on. A recent article on live interpreting of film at film festivals in the USSR (Razlogova 2015) is one of the few pieces of research to cover this fascinating area.
- c) **Industry conditions:** these are also a function of policies (union pay agreements; national legislation; protectionism, or its absence). Rates of pay, degree of labour organization and cultural capital all have a role to play in the stability of the conventions and practices which obtain in the industry. In research to date, these aspects of policy have not been extensively researched, though they are touched on in the Media Consulting Group and Peacefulfish report (2007).
- d) **Research partnership:** researchers working without access to industry or practitioners are increasingly limited in the scope of their research. Policy research needs to go more deeply into the factors governing decision-making for distributors, producers, exhibitors. At the moment, such information is occasionally available in snippets in industry publications,⁷ but to be useful for research, more substantial primary data needs to be identified. Researchers need to identify repositories of documentation which may shed light on language policy or film policy that in their turn have influenced translation practices. If we think of ‘policy’ as including the broad mass not only of legislation but also of guidelines, stylesheets, codes of practice, codes of conduct, regulations, internally circulated documentation, public statements, etc., then there is a large body of material

⁷ Examples include Dinhofer (1981) and Halligan (2000) on the efforts of the US majors to change audience habits by releasing dubbed Spanish prints in Puerto Rico, or subtitled prints of *Evita* across Europe, including dubbing territories; or Halligan (2000) on the changes in the proportion of dubbed and subtitled prints of major films released in France and Denmark.

out there to examine. If we think of policy in broader terms as something which can be extrapolated from, for instance, textual evidence, the body of material is potentially infinite.

- e) Crowdsourced and user-generated forms of AVT emerge in a particular regulatory environment (copyright law; regionally restricted availability of audiovisual products). Fansubbing groups can also have their own policies, which may or may not align with policies in the profession. They may also in turn be co-opted by more established and official entities in the industry (see, e.g., the instance of reported use of fansubs for streaming video by Netflix, as discussed in Ernesto 2012).
- f) Methodologically, more audience/reception research will be fundamental in order to assess the impact of policy. The digital revolution has meant that the choice of modality is now very often in the hands of the viewer who, for instance, downloads or otherwise cues a set of subtitles or, on DVD and now on television, a dub track in the chosen language. Even where it is available, data on this kind of usage recorded by broadcasters and distributors is likely to be commercially sensitive; researchers will need to do much more audience research in order to understand viewer responses to available modalities of translation. Similarly, we must look to much more research with translation and distribution companies.

5. A broad or narrow definition of policy?

One of the issues which will need to be addressed by future research into policy is the porousness of the concept. As Reine Meylaerts (2011) observes, it can be made to refer to almost any aspect of choice in translation, and “this all-encompassing character is obviously the concept’s Achilles heel, draining it of its specific meaning and thus of its added value compared to more successful alternatives like ‘strategies’ or ‘norms’.” Theo Hermans (1991, 163) has argued that “norms cover the entire range between conventions and decrees.” Policy falls somewhere between these two. So how to disentangle policy and norms? Clearly, the Party resolutions discussed by Gabrielle Chomentowski constitute policy in the narrow sense outlined by Meylaerts above: “political or public practices as implemented in legal rules.” How effectively these rules are then implemented is a separate question. But as indicated earlier in this article, such rules are not always easily available in text form. For instance, on 22 October 1930, the S.A. Agenzia Cosmos, associated with the Italian Ministry of the

Interior, instructed that no film which contained “del parlato in lingua straniera, sia pure in qualche parte e in misura minima” [foreign-language speech, even in parts and in the slightest degree] could be exhibited (Mereu 2013, 9). Riccardo Redi (2014, 395) points out that this was not in any law or decree, but in a simple ministerial circular. And Carla Mereu (2013, 9) points out that although the text is available in subsequent publications, her archival research has so far failed to trace the original document. Nevertheless, this was clearly treated as seriously as a government decree; between November 1929 and August 1933, Mereu counts 486 sound productions of all types which were released in Italian cinemas with the spoken sounds removed and Italian intertitles added (9-10).

One may also ask whether a consistent, marked practice by a director or exhibitor may also be included within a policy research framework. For instance, an individual cinema might choose to adopt a specific source language or set of source languages for film, as with the Julian Theater in Chicago, which showed only Scandinavian films, mostly with subtitles, from 1930 to 1940 (Colvin 2013). The committee at Anthology Film Archives in New York and Henri Langlois at the Cinémathèque are often said to have projected films without subtitles (see Razlogova 2015, 68). In a recent study, Benoît Turquety (2015) argues that the filmmakers Straub and Huillet espouse a specific policy about the translation of their films which is consistent with their overall aesthetic position and which they prioritize even over the exigencies of funding, which are one of the most powerful drivers of AVT policy. I would argue that all of these phenomena could properly be considered under the heading of translation policy and they offer fruitful future avenues of research, for instance, into the programme synopses and improvised intertitles of the Film Society (1927-1939) or the headphone commentaries of the National Film Theatre (see Butler 1971, 120-2).

Perhaps the best pragmatic way of dealing with the issue of policy in AVT is to consider it as an essential contextual element of any study in audiovisual translation. If a written policy exists on the part of any entity, whether governmental or not, it is part of due diligence on the part of a researcher to at least attempt to track it down, and to account for its location, or non-location, as part of writing up the research.

6. Full circle: Holmes’ concept of translation policy

As will be seen from the above remarks, one strong pattern in AVT policy research to date is its descriptive nature. Although researchers are also clearly aware of the potential for

influencing policy, it seems that research to date has not particularly focused on the relevance to developing policies in the audiovisual field, though accessibility may be an exception here (e.g., Romero Fresco 2013). Ideally, AVT research should be relevant enough to current practice that translation scholars would be in a position to contribute to policy (e.g., Artegi and Kapsaskis 2014) and that we should be setting ourselves the challenge to do so. Policy is one area in which Translation Studies has the potential to demonstrate real and immediate relevance to practice in the wider world.

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