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## Back to the Future in Subtitling

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### Abstract

Audiovisual translation (AVT) in general, and in subtitling in particular, has an umbilical relationship with technology, which to a large degree determines it. The technical advances taking place in this area can have an immediate and considerable impact both on the subtitling practice from the practitioner's perspective, and also on the perception of subtitling we have as spectators and consumers. This article proposes to investigate how some of the technological changes that have recently taken place in this field are affecting this translating mode. Focusing on interlingual subtitling in a variety of language combinations, I take a look at the different conventions that have started to crop up in commercialised DVD subtitled programs and that diverge acutely from what up until now has been considered standard practice in interlingual subtitling.

## 1 The technological revolution

Without any doubt, the most significant development to have radically affected the essence of this profession has been the possibility of digitizing the image. The shift from analog to digital technology has had a great impact upon work practices; e.g. in the design of specific software for subtitling; in the solid establishment of DVD in our society; in a greater dynamism in the traffic of audiovisual material, especially through the Internet; in the way in which we as spectators consume audiovisual programs; in the ease with which material can be accessed for research, and in the appearance of new types of subtitling. It is no exaggeration to claim that digital technology is altering our perception of the audiovisual world and our relationship to it.

One of the most striking factors is the surprising speed with which these changes have taken place. The subtitling praxis has undergone an important transformation in a relatively short period of time, with all the associated advantages and inconveniences. What was habitual practice ten or fifteen years ago in the spotting and simulation of subtitles has now become history. And what is today considered innovative and advanced might soon cease to be so.

The computer has been one of the advances to have greatly changed the world of translation in general; and it could be argued that in the field of subtitling the impact has been even greater, with the launch of many computer programs designed exclusively for subtitling work. The first subtitling equipment was marketed in the second half of the nineteen-seventies and, over time, has been perfected until arriving at the generations that are available today. Subtitling programs that a few years ago required a computer, as well as a video player and an

external television monitor in order to undertake all the necessary stages of the work, are today obsolete. Unless working with templates (i.e. files containing master English subtitles to be translated into other languages), subtitlers these days usually require a computer, a subtitling program, and a digitized copy of the audiovisual program to be subtitled. This equipment allows them to spot the dialog exchanges in the original, do the translation, use a spell checker, synchronize their own subtitles with the image on the screen and simulate what will be the final copy.

One of the most serious obstacles for the subtitler has traditionally been the prohibitive price of these subtitling programs, which has also had an adverse effect on the teaching of this discipline, as many universities and educational institutions find themselves unable to invest large sums of money in computer equipment which require a high level of technical attention and which evolve at a dizzying speed. For the translator working only sporadically in this area, or for those who receive templates in English with the spotting already done by the subtitling company, the complete set of subtitling equipment is perhaps unnecessary.

A practice that is gaining ground consists of offering to the freelance subtitler a version of the subtitling program which, while not offering the full functionality of the program, is sufficient for the professional to undertake many of the tasks involved in subtitling. Because they have fewer functions, these freelancer versions are easier to use. On the one hand, they require less technical preparation on the part of the translators, and on the other they minimize the risk of the subtitler getting lost in the handling of programs which may be complicated.

The functionality of these programs is being constantly revised with a view to maximize the subtitlers' productivity and, as a result, reduce the cost of the work. Some programs incorporate a function that shows changes in soundtrack volume and so helps to speed the spotting of the original dialog. Shot changes can also be automatically detected these days and voice recognition is another area in which much work is being done, having already borne some fruit in the preparation of live subtitles for the deaf and the hard-of-hearing. In the toolbox of machine assisted translation, automatic translation undertaken within the context of subtitling has for years been an incipient reality in the USA. Although still far from being entirely satisfactory, with examples like *Mr. Bush* becoming literally *el señor Arbusto* in Spanish, these attempts are aimed at meeting certain social needs. The USA has a long history of subtitling for the deaf and the hard-of-hearing, manifested in high percentages of intralingually subtitled audiovisual programs – i.e. from English to English – for these social groups. Through an automatic translation program, the company Global Translation, Inc. offers an automatic translation service in Spanish ([www.translatetv.com](http://www.translatetv.com)).

Mention has to be made of the development in translation memory tools which store previously translated sentences and allow the user to recall them as a base for a new translation. Based on computational linguistic analysis at an advanced level, these tools have had a very important impact on translation practice, although their value in the case of AVT is questionable and still to be researched. At present, they appear to be more effective for working with documents characterized by a high level of lexical repetition. It is clear that the application of corpus studies to translation is an avenue of research that has yielded fruit in other areas of translation such as technical and specialized translation, but which still appears not to have made its entry into the field of AVT.

Technology and computers have had a direct impact upon the subtitling praxis and have made life easier for all those working in the world of subtitling. But it is also true that they have changed the work profile expected of subtitlers. Linguistic competence and socio-cultural and subject knowledge are no longer sufficient in order to be able to operate effectively in this profession. A reasonably high technical knowledge, as well as an ability to quickly familiarize with new programs and specifications is now expected of subtitlers. Subtitlers have to be conversant with the information and communication technologies.

## 2 DVD is here to stay

The arrival of DVD can be considered the most significant advance in our field. It is having the greatest impact in the way audiovisual programs are sold and marketed, and it has changed subtitling as a translation practice. Since bursting onto the market, its rise has been unstoppable: “DVD became the most successful consumer electronics product of all time in less than three years of its introduction. In 2003, six years after introduction, there were over 250 million DVD playback devices worldwide” (DVD Demystified, 2004).

The DVD is a versatile disc on which audio and video material as well as all types of electronic documents can be recorded and reproduced. It is a new generation of optical disc that, although very similar to the CD, is essentially faster and has a greater memory capacity, a potential recognized by the audiovisual industry. Perhaps its most significant advantage is the possibility of incorporating up to 8 versions of the same program dubbed into different languages, and up to 32 subtitle tracks in several other languages.

Its large memory capacity makes it possible to offer material on the same DVD that a few years ago was not marketed at all, or done only very occasionally on some VHS tapes. Today, however, practically all DVDs contain, in addition to the film, extra material, including selected filmographies and biographies of the main actors; inter-active menus in different languages, a selection of photographs, interviews with the director, actors or heads of the production and special effects teams, copies of the trailers used for publicity etc. Sometimes the duration of this bonus material is longer than the film itself and, having been recorded in a different language, requires translating. Neither dubbing nor voice-over are normally used for the translation of this material. Subtitles are usually the preferred approach, which has meant a considerable increase in the volume of subtitling work in the past few years (cf. Gottlieb 2007).

The superior technical virtues of DVD, compared with VHS tape, together with the commercial interests of certain companies, have contributed to a change in the habits of viewers who have, on the whole, embraced DVD and rejected VHS. The impact upon the AVT profession, and particularly subtitling, has been intense since old films that had previously been distributed on VHS have had to be transferred into the new DVD medium. But it is not only old films that have taken advantage of this situation. Television series that are normally broadcast dubbed on Spanish, Italian, German or French television (*Ally McBeal*, *Friends*, *Sex and the City* or *The Simpsons*, to give just a few examples), are later sold on DVD in both dubbed and subtitled versions. The same thing happens with some of the most recent films. They are launched in the cinema dubbed, but are later marketed also with subtitles on DVD. It is no longer only art films that are subtitled but also the major studios' releases since the production of subtitled versions requires a relatively small investment. Traditional dubbing countries such as Spain, France, Germany or Italy, where subtitling has been historically marginal, have now awoken to the reality that most of the film releases and television programs are both dubbed and subtitled, for their distribution on DVD. The inverse situation – i.e. dubbing for DVD of films that were originally marketed only with subtitles – has also occurred, though to a lesser extent given that it is a far more expensive activity. Examples are the dubbing into English of films like *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, *Life is Beautiful*, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Betty Blue*.

The possibility of incorporating up to 32 subtitling tracks on one DVD has given rise to new realities in AVT. Traditionally, a distinction has been made, *grosso modo*, between two types of subtitling. The *interlingual*, implying the translation of a source language into a target language, and the *intra-lingual*, also known in American English as *captioning*, in which there is no change of language: Spanish dialog is subtitled in Spanish. On television, these subtitles are transmitted as an independent signal which is activated by accessing a teletext page – 888 in the UK for instance – and their social function is to meet the needs of the deaf

and the hard-of-hearing in order to assure greater access to audiovisual programming. This is achieved by changing the actors' dialog into written speech which also incorporates, among other things, all the paratextual information that contributes to the development of the plot or the creation of atmosphere that the deaf are unable to access through the soundtrack, e.g. a telephone ringing, the knock on a door or a car revving. This type of subtitling, known as subtitling for the deaf and the hard-of-hearing (SDH), has been made more widespread thanks to DVD, and it has undergone a spectacular growth in some languages, notably English<sup>1</sup>. However, this taxonomy has systematically ignored a professional practice that has already existed for several years and is acquiring, thanks to DVD, greater visibility: interlingual subtitles for the deaf and the hard-of-hearing.

Historically, the members of these communities in countries with a dubbing tradition, such as Spain, Germany, France or Italy, could only see programs that had been originally produced in Spanish, German, French or Italian and subsequently subtitled into their respective languages. Given that the translating custom of these four countries has been to dub the vast majority of their foreign programming, the deaf and the hard-of-hearing have had difficulty in accessing the information contained in these programs. In other nations with more of a tradition in subtitling, such as Portugal, Greece and the Scandinavian countries, the deaf have normally been served by the same interlingual subtitles as the hearing, even when these are evidently inappropriate to their needs.

With the arrival of DVD the situation has changed and is continuing to change. On the one hand, a growing number of films in a growing number of languages are being distributed with an intralingual subtitled track. On the other, pressure groups in countries such as Germany, the UK and Italy have managed to get many foreign films marketed in their countries with two different interlingual subtitle tracks: one for the hearing and one which takes into account the needs of the deaf. Thus, American films such as *Thelma & Louise* or *Annie Hall* incorporate two subtitle tracks in German – one for the hearers and one SDH. Similarly, Spanish films like *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* are marketed on DVD with two interlingual subtitle tracks in English and a further two in German. Unfortunately, other languages such as Spanish, French or Portuguese lag behind in these new developments and at present it does not appear to be a practice which is undertaken. It is only through pressure groups demanding changes in this area that social advances directed towards facilitating access to the media for all can be achieved.

### 3 Low quality?

For a long time now there has been a growing concern among many professionals about the relatively low levels of quality that can be found in some subtitled programs. Although it is clear that subjectivity can play a big role in identifying what is wrong or of low quality in subtitling, it is in my opinion undeniable that quality standards in subtitling have seen a sharp decline in recent years. The reasons for this development are manifold.

The hike in the demand for subtitled programs has brought about a mushrooming of companies working in AVT, and more particularly in subtitling, which might not have the necessary expertise when dealing with this type of translation. Some of these companies are new players in the field, whilst some others have a solid background in AVT although in related areas, such as intralingual SDH. Poor working conditions are also to blame for this

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<sup>1</sup> This is probably the most rapidly growing AVT type today, greatly due to the success of pressure groups lobbying on behalf of this section of the audience. Their fight has borne fruit in the passing of legislation in many Western countries making it compulsory for television stations to broadcast a certain percentage of their programs with SDH. For the most comprehensive account on SDH to date see Neves (2005).

decline. Ever lower pay rates for translators, more and more precarious freelancing, little training for newcomers, absence of proper in-house guidelines, little time for doing enough research and impossible deadlines do little to boost the morale of translators and to stimulate a positive working ethos. We cannot forget that subtitling is the result of a team effort and the decline in standards must not be blamed solely on the figure of the translator. Some of the most noticeable pitfalls occur at the technical level: inappropriate spotting of original dialog, unfortunate choice of font, low legibility, awkward presentation on screen etc. A less slack attitude on the part of some technicians will undoubtedly contribute to better standards.

It can also be argued that the absence – be it at local, national or international level – of a consensus in regard to quality in interlingual subtitling, or of a body responsible for ensuring the application of a minimum standard of quality, has favored this situation. The attempts made by Ivarsson and Carroll (1998: 157-159) to propose a code of good subtitling practice stemming from proposals put forward by the European Association for Studies in Screen Translation ([www.esist.org](http://www.esist.org)) have not borne the fruit for which many hoped.

Although some of the solutions reached in the examples that I analyze below can be unequivocally considered instances of poor quality, it is not my intention in these pages to enter a debate about a possible decline in standards. Rather, I intend to offer a descriptive account of some of the new ways in which subtitles are being presented nowadays on some of our screens. My interest lies primarily in the form and layout, and not so much in the content and the linguistic transfer that has taken place. All the examples used here are authentic and come from audiovisual programs currently on sale.

## **4 New conventions in interlingual subtitling**

### **4.1 Dialogue techniques**

When indicating to the viewer that the subtitle on screen is showing what two characters are saying, one of the most deeply entrenched subtitling conventions has been to show each of the enunciates on a separate line. Thus, the first line, which may or may not be preceded by a dash, is reserved for the first character who speaks and the second, which is always preceded by a dash, for the second speaker. The two following subtitles are common in the profession:

-Does anybody want a drink? -Yes.
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Does anybody want a drink? -Yes.
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However, this practice is starting to be questioned in two different ways. In what is clearly an attempt to make a more rational use of the space available for the subtitle, the first of these new approaches ignores the traditional line break of the subtitle, which gives a line to each of the two speakers. When two actors are speaking in the same subtitle, the segmentation that is now proposed is based on criteria more concerned with lexical density than with aesthetics or tradition. The priority is to include as much information as possible in the subtitle, and, in order to do that, the dialog uttered by the second speaker immediately follows the first speaker, starting in the very same line, as can be seen in Fig. 1:



Fig. 1: Stargate

Another convention that is being subverted refers to the number of speakers that we can encounter in the same subtitle. Once more, tradition has dictated that a maximum of two actors and two turn-takings can share the same subtitle (one per line). A new subtitle needs to be cued in when a third speaker, or speech turn, is to be translated. Following a pattern similar to the one seen in the above example, we also find instances (Fig. 2) in which three turn-takings are fit into one subtitle in order to make the most of the space and time limitations:

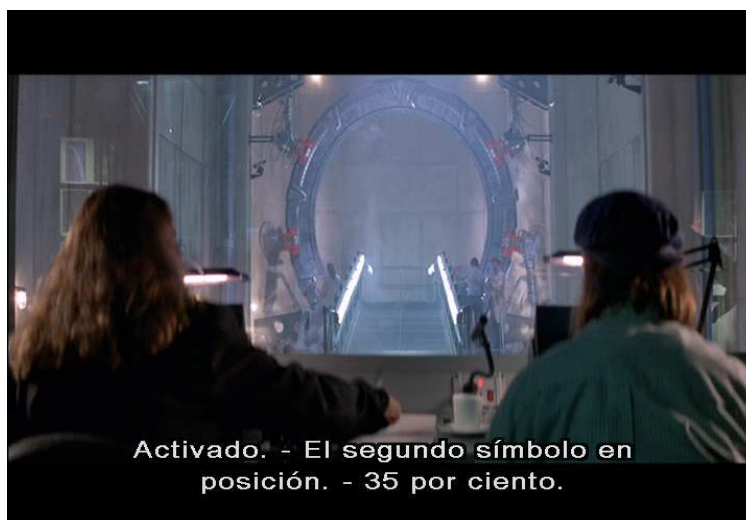


Fig. 2: Stargate

## 4.2 Number of lines

One of the most consistent and recurrent criticisms against subtitles has been directed towards the fact that they pollute the photography and distract our attention from what is going on in the image. For some, this ancillary device distorts the artistic work of the director of photography as well as the narrative work of the filmmaker, as it is superimposed on the original images. They are text added *a posteriori* and were never intended to be an integral part of the artwork. They are not an artistic creation but a necessary evil that we have to cope with in order to gain access to programs in other languages. It is for this reason that

traditionally, and rather arbitrarily, only two lines of subtitles have been used in interlingual subtitling as opposed to other modes, such as SDH, which count on subtitles of three and even four lines<sup>2</sup>. The two lines are normally placed at the bottom of the screen so as to interfere as little as possible with the image. In fact, as can be seen for instance in Figures 2 and 5, the format of the film is sometimes taken advantage of to place the subtitles, or at least one of the two lines, beneath the actual image. It is therefore surprising, to say the least, that some films are marketed with a lot of space between the two subtitle lines, which unnecessarily occupy and contaminate a substantial part of the screen, as in the example in Fig. 3:



Fig. 3: *Night of the Living Dead*

But this most generalized convention of having a maximum of two lines is also being challenged, and three-liners are starting to crop up in some films. The reasons behind this approach are not self evident and it is difficult to justify a presentation like the one in Fig. 4 where exactly the same information could easily be redistributed in two lines:



Fig. 4: *Dune*

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<sup>2</sup> Although the convention to resort to a maximum of two lines has prevailed in most countries, in some like Turkey the use of three lines is relatively common. Four lines are also frequent in places where bilingual subtitling is done, such as in Finland and Belgium, where in some cases two lines are for the Finnish/French translation and the other two lines for the translation in Swedish/Flemish.



### 4.3 Use of colors

One of the main differences between interlingual and intralingual subtitles has been their different approach to the use of colors. In this respect, SDH has always been more chromatically rich than subtitling for hearers. Teletext subtitling permits the use of up to seven different colors for text, although not all of them are satisfactory for subtitling due to their poor legibility on screen. Colors are used to help speaker identification and to inform deaf viewers about sound effects and particular tones of voice to which they do not have access auditorily. Given that hearing viewers can retrieve all these details effortlessly from the original soundtrack, the use of colors has been deemed to be irrelevant in interlingual subtitling, in which historically just one color has been used throughout the entire program: white or yellow.

Once again, we can purchase programs and films that resort to an unprecedented use of colors in our field. In the English subtitles of some Japanese films this departure from traditional conventions is expressed in the use of a palette of four different colors throughout the same film. Their choice of colors to relay information does not seem to be very systematic, perhaps due to the fact that this approach is very innovative and is still not settled in the profession. The following figures illustrate situations when colors are used<sup>3</sup>:

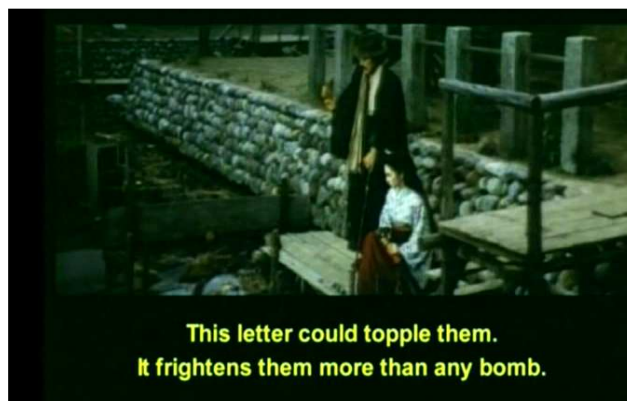


Fig. 5: *Lady Snowblood. Love Song of Vengeance*  
(both lines are in yellow)



Fig. 6: *Baby Cart in the Land of Demons*  
(top line in yellow, bottom line in green)



Fig. 7: *Zatoichi's Pilgrimage*  
(top line in yellow, bottom line in blue)



Fig. 8: *Baby Cart in the Land of Demons*  
(top line in yellow, bottom line in green/ red)

<sup>3</sup> Most of the stills in this paper are also available, in color, on:  
[www.euroconferences.info/proceedings/2005\\_Proceedings/Diaz%20Cintas\\_Jorge.pdf](http://www.euroconferences.info/proceedings/2005_Proceedings/Diaz%20Cintas_Jorge.pdf).



Yellow is the main color for the translation of dialog. It is the only color used when the subtitle, be it a one-liner or a two-liner, renders the translation of one actor's speech (Fig. 5). When the subtitle incorporates two speakers (Figures 6 and 7), the first line is always in yellow, whereas the character in the second line appears in some films in green (Fig. 6) and in some other films in cyan or blue (Fig. 7). Green is also used in some movies to indicate that the voices that we hear are off-screen and to translate the content of songs, instances that normally call for italics. The unorthodox convention of accommodating three speakers in the very same subtitle is also implemented in these films, and to identify them yellow, green and red are assigned to the first, second and third actors respectively, as seen in Fig. 8.

The other color that is regularly used is white. Fig. 9 below shows us one of its multiple usages, which is to translate the opening and closing credits of a film.



Fig. 9: *Baby Cart in the Land of Demons*

This arguably over-zealous attitude on the part of the distribution company to offer a full and detailed account of this type of information, usually overlooked in other subtitled programs, could be explained by the fact that the original language on the screen does not have the currency of other languages like English. It can be easily assumed that Western audiences will not be familiar with the Japanese alphabets, Kanji in this instance, and will need a full translation to avoid deception. They cannot know whether these are the opening credits of the film, or whether they are a forward, setting the context in which the rest of the plot fits.

What is also unusual in this example, and more interesting from the presentation point of view, is the way the spotting has been done. Rather than having two subtitles of two lines projected one after the other, they have preferred to offer two two-liners at the same time: one at the top and the other at the bottom of the screen. It goes without saying that this approach loads the reading effort of the viewer and contributes to create a somewhat overpowering feeling, with too much writing packed in on the screen. In an apparent attempt to fit all the information of the original into the subtitles, the order in which the credits are presented in English does not follow the Japanese. The details about lighting, that in Kanji characters appear in the second line, have moved to the end of the bottom line in the English subtitle. Despite this juggling of information, the technician has been unable to avoid the rather abrupt line break that takes place from the third to the fourth line.

One way to evaluate this new practice is to consider that colors call undue attention to the subtitles and detract from the photography. They do not seem to add any new information in interlingual subtitling, as opposed to SDH, and although innovative, they are rather unnecessary. The other side of the coin will be to argue that they try to guide the viewer with an unfamiliar language like Japanese, which is not as well known and widespread as English. Colors, in some instances, could help viewers to identify speakers.

This chromatic revolution in DVD subtitles for hearers contrasts sharply with the evolution encountered in SDH that has, paradoxically, gone in the opposite direction. From using colors on teletext, it has moved to being monochromatic – usually white – when distributed on DVD.

#### **4.4 Cumulative subtitles**

According to tradition, as mentioned previously, when two speakers appear in the same subtitle, each one is allocated a line and both appear at the same time on the screen. SDH also makes sporadic use of what is known as the overlay technique (Baker *et al.* 1984: 20-21) or cumulative subtitles (BBC 1998: 9) to allow two – exceptionally three – turns appearing in the same subtitle but not at the very same time. The second part of the text appears in synch with the second speaker and is added to the first part, while this first utterance remains on screen. All parts leave the screen at the same time. This technique is applied when delaying part of the information is important for dramatic considerations, such as keeping punch lines separate, or to follow the rhythm of a song. Applying SDH, interlingual subtitling is also resorting to this strategy, as can be seen in Figures 10 and 11:



Fig. 10: *Baby Cart in the Land of Demons*



Fig. 11: *Baby Cart in the Land of Demons*  
(top line in yellow, bottom line in green)

One of the golden rules in interlingual subtitling is that the in and out cueing of a subtitle should coincide with the beginning and the end of the corresponding speech segment. To display simultaneously the speech of two different actors goes clearly against this rule, since the second actor's sentence will always appear on screen irremediably before it having been uttered. From a technical point of view, cumulative subtitles would seem to be the obvious solution to this dilemma as they have the advantage of respecting the synch recommendation.

However, in the professional practice the overlay technique is rarely implemented and subtitlers are discouraged from resorting to it because it tends to cause some perceptual confusion when read (Baker *et al.* 1988: 21). Despite this proviso, rather than disappearing, it seems to be spreading to the world of interlingual subtitling.

#### 4.5 Metatextual information

The space and time limitations to which subtitling is subjected have frequently been invoked to foreground its specificity as a translation mode, and to explain why subtitlers cannot resort to metalinguistic devices such as footnotes, prologues or afterwords in order to justify their solutions. Even if they have fully understood the punning in the original or the obscure cultural reference, if the constraints imposed by the medium are too stringent, they cannot pass on their knowledge to the viewers or justify their personal approach to the translation. In an earlier publication (Díaz Cintas 2003: 46), I stated that: "As things stand presently, the subtitler has to accept the impossibility of resorting to the metatextual note as an aid to his work", while at the same time I offered a ray of hope by speculating that "the hint of an improvement can be seen with DVD, as this format can incorporate metafilmic information about the making of the film or about the actors and, with goodwill, perhaps a general note by the translator might also be included" (my translation).

The large memory capacity of DVD means that this highly attractive possibility could become reality. From the technical point of view, there is no obstacle to the incorporation of more precise information on the translation as part of the bonus material. It can be argued that these sections will not be those most watched by viewers, but it is clear that the profile of the DVD consumer is heterogeneous and it seems reasonable to claim that there will always be people, such as film theorists, AVT translators and film enthusiasts who are interested in material of this kind. In areas like literature, drama and poetry, translation of the same text

takes on different manifestations. Literary works aimed at the philological scholar may be translated with many footnotes, whereas they will be eliminated when the readership is expected to be broader. Parallel texts with lots of notes may be a blessing for the language learner, but a nuisance for the general reader. A play can be differently translated depending on whether it will be performed or simply read. And poetry can be translated in verse or prose depending, once again, on the profile of the intended readership. In the same way, and to satisfy the needs of different viewers, there could be several approaches to subtitling. In fact, it might be said that we are slowly moving in that direction.

Today, we can already find films on the market that contain extra material centered on the translation process. One example is *Shrek*. The DVD of this film includes the documentary International Dubbing Featurette, which offers information on the dubbing of the film in more than twenty countries, with specific references to Italy, Spain, Germany, Mexico, France and Brazil. It also contains a section called ReVoice Studio, which attempts to bring the techniques of dubbing to the viewer in a playful way. Addressing the viewer, the DVD claims that you can “[r]ecord your voice over your favorite character’s dialog lines and star in entire scenes of the movie. You can be the voice of Donkey, Shrek, Fiona, Lord Farquaad or a fairy tale creature in one of 12 hilarious and fun scenes!”. Although this approach to the subject can be considered somewhat frivolous and anecdotal in that it does not focus on specific problems of translation, it helps to raise a certain degree of awareness about the whole translation issue and opens new possibilities of talking and reflecting about translation that were unthinkable until very recently. Kayahara (2005: 68) also cites the example of the Japanese film *Princess Mononoke*, released on DVD in North America with a brief interview with the translator of the film into English.

The interference and presence of the translator through metatextual interventions in the film itself, be it in the form of footnotes or glosses, has always been out of the question in our field. SDH has always resorted to the use of labels in order to convey information that would otherwise elude the deaf and hard-of-hearing viewer. In interlingual subtitling, the imperative of having to synchronize original dialog and subtitles, the need to stay within a maximum of two lines per subtitle, and the widespread belief that the best subtitles are the ones that are not noticed, seem to confirm the idea that it is actually impossible to add any extra information alongside the translation. Once again, subtitling for DVD appears to be breaking old taboos and offering a wide range of new opportunities.

These are undoubtedly some of the most interesting and daring examples mentioned up to this point, which can be found not only in these films but also in many others belonging to the same genre. In Fig. 12, we come across an instance in which the Japanese Kanji characters in blue have been first transliterated in Roman alphabet, *Meifumado*, and then translated in English as *The Crossroads to Hell*. Fig. 13 illustrates a conventional gloss in which the original term *jitte* is left in the translation and immediately explained in between brackets in the line below, using a different color. Figures 14 and 15 offer the explanation of certain cultural references by means of some rather unobtrusive glosses. From a translational perspective, this approach questions preconceived ideas about the visibility or invisibility of the subtitler. In a rather bold and unconventional way, translators make their unequivocal appearance on the screen, and their color is white.



Fig. 12: *Baby Cart in the Land of Demons*  
(all three lines in white)



Fig. 13: *Zatoichi's Pilgrimage*  
(top line in yellow, bottom line in white)



Fig. 14: *A Touch of Spice*



Fig. 15: *A Touch of Spice*

The same strategy of leaving and explaining foreign terms is applied in Figures 16 and 17, albeit in a much more disruptive and innovative way:



Fig. 16: *Baby Cart in the Land of Demons*  
(top line in white, bottom line in yellow)



Fig. 17: *Baby Cart in the Land of Demons*  
(top line in white, bottom line in yellow)

The duration on screen of both subtitles is some four and six seconds respectively, which is very little time for a viewer to read all four lines of text. Without entering into an evaluation of the potentially disconcerting effect in Fig. 14 of the use of the possessive *her* in the translation, *boys* on the upper line explanation and the image of a girl, this way of presenting the information becomes a real challenge for the viewer because of the short time it appears on screen and its innovative nature. Reading this information takes on a full new twist, at odds with normal practice. Against habit, viewers are here meant to read first the information that appears at the bottom of the screen and then raise their eyes to the top of the screen to start reading the metalinguistic information about the translation. By analogy to footnotes, these new subtitles could be called *headnotes* or *topnotes*.

In an audiovisual market dominated at an international level by USA mainstream movies and iconography, it seems reasonable to assume that consumers of these more exotic films will not be thick on the ground. The use of a different film language, based on aesthetics and plot conventions that diverge from the Hollywood canon, as well as the fact that the dialog exchanges are in Japanese/Greek and the cultural references may be somewhat cryptic, justifies this assumption. The profile of the consumer of these programs has to be by necessity different to that of the average viewer and it is this primary conception of the receiver that would seem to legitimize the use of metatextual notes. We are dealing here with potential viewers highly interested in the Japanese way of living; Japanophiles who watch this type of film to expand their knowledge of the Japanese culture and language.

Another reason for the implementation of this strategy is that DVD, in comparison with cinema or television, allows the viewer greater control in that the projection can be stopped or rewound when considered necessary. This translating strategy could also be exploited, in a slightly modified form, with other types of less marginal films. At present these two subtitle tracks appear simultaneously on screen. However, the DVD could easily be designed so that both tracks were independent and viewers could decide whether to have just one track activated (the subtitles) or the two (subtitles and notes) at the same time. This approach is clearly feasible and would certainly make the most of interactivity in the age of digital technology.

## 5 By way of a conclusion

In view of the panorama presented here, one of the main conclusions that can be drawn is that we are living a period characterized by extraordinary dynamism and creative activity in the world of subtitling in general, and DVD subtitling in particular. With the arrival of DVD it is clear that not only is professional practice changing, in a development which in itself would be worthy of study, but that the very essence of subtitling and the conventions applied are also in flux. The reasons are manifold. Of the various AVT modes, subtitling has experienced the fastest and greatest growth in the market and it will continue along these lines for the foreseeable future. It has many advantages to make it the preferred mode in the AVT world, but three are crucial: it is the fastest, the most economical and the most flexible as it can be used for the translation of almost all types of audiovisual programs. The development and spread of digital technology, fuelled by our society's cult of the image, have accelerated the flow and exchange of audiovisual materials. Subtitling is rapidly becoming the preferred AVT mode on the Internet. This boom and exponential growth has allowed for the emergence of new voices – voices of dissent that subvert rules and conventions traditionally considered standard in the delivery of subtitles.

This climate of change and innovation is, in my opinion, somewhat reminiscent of the exhilaration witnessed during the early years in the history of cinema. After the initial success

of the new medium, filmmakers started to play with more complex and interesting formal properties to keep the public's interest. Virtually every approach was considered worthwhile exploring, from strategies to create coherent spatial and temporal relations within narratives to the coming of sound, without forgetting the many trials at incorporating the written word during the silent era. Despite the belief upheld by some cinematographers that the new medium was to be based solely on images and that the use of the written word in a film was totally objectionable, experiments in the area started early. In the first instance, directors would play with intertitles, predecessors of the subtitles, in an attempt to find a new expressive language. Later, they would also experiment with the incorporation of text in the image itself by means of letters, notes or posters with a diegetic value. Drawing a parallel, the use of colors, cumulative subtitles, explicative glosses and metalinguistic *headnotes* in interlingual subtitling could be considered the fruit of the contemporary agitation that welcomes the advent of a new breakthrough in mass communication: the digital era. If history is cyclical, we seem to be going back in time to propose new practices that look ahead and which might well become routine in the future.

Interlingual subtitles have been traditionally a lot more conventional than SDH and that is why they offer the subtitler more scope to be creative. Paradoxically, and inexplicably, this compelling drive to be creative seems to be counteracted in DVD SDH where the trend appears to be going in the opposite direction, neutralizing the use of colors – as mentioned above – and avoiding the displacement of subtitles to indicate who is speaking, for instance. However, new approaches might be lurking around the corner. Indeed, scholars like Neves (2005) are already working in this direction and putting forward proposals in SDH that are intrinsically linked to the potential offered by digital technology, such as the incorporation into the subtitles of smilies, emoticons, and a limited range of dynamic icons and symbols.

From where can this creativity drive be traced? Digital technology has to be one of the main answers, as it offers a great deal of technical potential for the development of new conventions in subtitling, both interlingual and SDH. It has also changed our perception of audiovisual materials and offered us greater choice. DVD has altered the way in which we consume audiovisual programs, giving viewers an unusual degree of control as to the linguistic combination in which they wish to watch a program. We are dealing with an active rather than passive viewer. The average viewer is increasingly more deeply immersed in the world of the image and has a greater familiarity with new technologies. Never before has there been such a close relationship between films and computers as we see now, with most computers equipped with DVD readers and burners. The television and the computer appear to be converging into one same screen offering very similar functions. They seem to be interchangeable. Today, we can watch the television on our PC or laptop and use the television set as a computer. Interactivity is a buzzword and its potential is enormous.

The profile of this new viewer might well be one of the reasons informing the changes we have observed. We encounter a new viewer avid for information and, therefore, even the initial credits of the film are not only translated, but also transliterated. In the examples offered, more importance seems to be given to the actual cultural referent than to a “correct” translation. The consumer is genuinely interested in the foreign culture and language and the acculturation of terms is avoided. And to do so, the subtitler is prepared to go to great lengths such as the revolutionary use of *headnotes* and glosses on the screen, an occurrence unheard of in our field that throws into disarray previously upheld notions about the translator's visibility or invisibility in AVT.

Despite their apparent innovative nature, these conventions are not so much “new” as “borrowed” from other instances where subtitles are also used, notably video games and *fansubs*. The Internet has fully come of age. Computer subtitling programs have become much more affordable and accessible, with many of them being available free on the net. To create subtitles has become reasonably easy these days, as can be seen in the dramatic



increase of translating practices like *fansubs* ([www.fansubs.net](http://www.fansubs.net), [www.fansubs.org](http://www.fansubs.org)). The origins of *fansubbing* go back to the eighties, when it emerged as an attempt to popularize the Japanese cartoons known as *manga* and *anime*. European and American fans wanted to watch their favorite programs but were faced with two main problems: on the one hand, the linguistic barrier and on the other, the scant distribution of these series in their respective countries. The option was to subtitle these programs themselves. Despite the questionable legality of this activity, the philosophy underlying this subtitling is the free distribution over the Internet of audiovisual programs with subtitles done by fans. The translations are done for free by aficionados and then posted on the Internet. This new form of subtitling “by fans for fans” lies at the margins of market imperatives and is far less dogmatic and more creative and individualistic than that which has traditionally been done. In fact, some aficionados prefer to use the term *subbing*, instead of subtitling, in order to emphasize the peculiar nature of the activity. In the first instance, this practice dealt solely with Japanese *anime* into English, but nowadays it has spread to other linguistic combinations and other audiovisual programs such as films. Little research has been done to date in this field (Bogucki, forthcoming; Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez 2006; Ferrer Simó, 2005), but it would be hugely interesting to research and analyze these new practices in detail, and to see whether any points of contact can be established with other more traditional practices.

Interlingual subtitling on DVD seems to be leading the way to change, ahead of cinema and television, in all likelihood because of its digital nature. As yet, it is difficult to tell whether the solutions seen here, or some of them, will spread to other media. As far as languages are concerned, the most innovative approaches seen here occur when subtitling from Japanese to English (cf. O’Hagan 2007). Are they the trademark of just a few DVD authoring companies? Will they migrate to other language combinations? The current situation is not clearly defined. We seem to be witnessing a process of hybridization where different subtitling approaches and strategies are competing. Subtitling conventions are not set in stone and only time will tell whether these conventions are just a mere fleeting fashion or whether they are the seed of a new type of subtitling for a new distribution format.

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