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Using Fansubbing as an Interdisciplinary Tool for Subtitle Teaching in the Slovak Context

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Abstract

The presented article deals with bringing amateur subtitles into the process of subtitle teaching. While subtitling has developed into an independent discipline within translation studies, there are still blank spaces to be filled in the area of subtitle teaching, which has been lacking especially in Slovakia. We briefly describe amateur subtitles and their history, address the issue of subtitling in Slovakia and abroad and highlight the interdisciplinarity of subtitling and subtitle teaching, which results from combining translation studies, technical aspects of subtitling and the current situation on the market, all of which constitute an important basis for subtitle teaching. We also present how amateur subtitles might be helpful in subtitle teaching, specifically because of the usual number of mistakes they contain and because they reflect the need of subtitling market and the audience. The overall aim of this article is to link text analysis, translation criticism, technical aspects and market demands in the form of amateur subtitles, which can help the students to learn by observation, analysis, criticism and feedback.

Keywords: subtitles, television, analysis, teaching, translation, software, technology, fansubbing, amateur, classroom.

Introduction

Subtitling as a part of translation studies has gone through a radical development during the past two decades and nowadays has become an acknowledged discipline within the field. There are numerous books published on subtitling and subtitle teaching (Cintas-Anderman, 2009; Orero, 2004; Cintas – Remael, 2007) advising the translators how to create subtitles of good quality and how to prepare future translators for the subtitling market.

The subtitling theory focuses not only on the aspect of incorporating translation studies into the practice [Thawabteh, 2011: 24], but also technological aspects such as spotting, using software and current situation on the subtitling market [Pošta, 2011: 7-10]. While all these practices are important in order to prepare a student for a successful career as a translator working in the subtitling industry, we still feel there is a room for improvement when teaching subtitling as a translation practice.

The aim of this article is to introduce the possibility of using *fansubbing* or amateur subtitles in the classroom as a didactic tool for subtitle teaching. This practice overlaps with translation criticism, but also expands to technical aspects of subtitling, creating a multidisciplinary approach to the topic, diverting from theory to actual practice and working with materials that are up to date in the context of technological era and contemporary media.

Fansubbing

The term fansubbing comes from a linguistic blend of the words fans and subtitling, originating “with the creation of the first anime clubs back in the 1980s” [Cintas – Sánchez, 2016: 37] and with the accessibility provided by the internet, becoming “nowadays the most important manifestation of fan translation” [Cintas – Sánchez, 2016: 37].” Fansubbing has a doubtful legal status because of the copyrights which usually do not allow distribution of digital media. Despite

this conflict with law, there is an ever-growing community of translators creating amateur subtitles for various films and television series

While initially fansubbing emerged in relation with Japanese anime [Lee, 2010: 4], today we can say it has become a part of almost every culture and language (Bold, 2011; Massidda, 2013; Zhang, 2013) including the Slovak and Czech contexts. In Slovakia, amateur subtitles emerge mostly based on the illegal copies of films and television series, although the sites providing subtitles claim there is no copyright infringement.

In the context of Slovak and Czech translation, amateur subtitles are considered an unclear contribution to the translation market. In relation to the audience, this kind of subtitles is a free, unpaid and simple way to watch films in a different language. Often, the subtitles are made as soon as the film/episode airs and the speed of subtitle production is a priority. While often translators who create amateur subtitles receive no financial reward and the primary motivation is also non-financial, it may lead to the disruption of the market [Pym, 2012: 4] since translation reaches the status of an easy and anonymous job.

From the point of view of translation studies, amateur subtitles are often considered substandard [Pošta, 2011: 9], though technologically better than the official subtitles. This is because amateur subtitles are created by non-professional translators (students, fans) who do not know translation strategies, but are technologically advanced and have no problem to spot or time the subtitles. However, compared to official subtitles, there is a possibility of better feedback as subtitles appear online and can be commented on, therefore providing room for further changes and improvement.

The technological aspect of fansubbing requires most commonly a software that is freely available to the users, such as *Subtitle Workshop*. The translator, or the subtitler as a person who not only translates, but also spots the subtitles, usually waits for the English version of subtitles, which make spotting easier [Tvarzdík, 2015: 1].

Teaching subtitling in the Slovak context

Subtitling and audiovisual translation are closely related to the rise of media in the 21st century. In Slovakia, translators and scholars reacted to this trend rather later than abroad [Želonka 2014: 10] and subtitling and audiovisual translation are still relevant topics in the Slovak context. As Želonka mentions, the need for the theory on audiovisual translation was mentioned as soon as in 1983 by authors as Bednárová, Hochel and Popovič. Today, most notable authors in Slovakia dealing with audiovisual translation are Emília Janecová (2012), Edita Gromová (2013) or Miroslav Pošta in Czech context (2011), whose publication *Titulkujeme profesionálně (Professional subtitling)* is unique in the Czech and the Slovak contexts, since it is very recent and can be applied also to the needs of Slovak subtitling market.

As subtitling developed into an independent discipline within translation studies, the need for teaching practices appeared alongside with this development. Subtitling as a course is nowadays taught at many universities whether abroad or in Slovakia (*Matej Bel University, Constantine the Philosopher University, Comenius University*) and also many publications appeared on teaching subtitling. Most notables to mention are *The Didactics of Audiovisual Translation* (2008) by Jorge Díaz Cintas, articles as *Teaching Subtitling at University* (2001) also by Jorge Díaz Cintas; *Teaching Subtitling Routines* (1994) by Herman Brondeel; *Teaching Subtitling in a Virtual Environment* (2003) by Francesca Bartrina; *Teaching Audiovisual Translation: Theory and Practice in the Twenty-first Century* (2012) by Emília Janecová as an insight into teaching subtitling in Slovakia or *Teaching Audiovisual Translation* (2003) by Christine Sponholz as a topic of a master's thesis.

In the following part of the article we present the most common techniques used and mentioned for teaching subtitling. As we have previously mentioned, it is important to focus on the three main aspects of subtitling: the aspect of translation studies, technical aspect and the aspects of the subtitling market.

Subtitling is considered for literary translation [Pošta, 2011: 22] and is therefore subject to common translation problems solvable with translation strategies. While a book translation presents no constraint for a translator in terms of space and time, "there are numerous constraints in subtitling, and there is no systematic recipe to be followed" [Georgakopoulou, 2009: 29]. In terms of translation studies we therefore have to pick translation strategies that fit these

constraints. Georgakopoulou mentions that “reduction ... is the most important and frequently used strategy in subtitling” [Georgakopoulou, 2009: 30], which is because of the character limited lines of subtitles, and also the limited time of the appearance. Naturally other translation strategies and methods are applicable and often necessary, specifically simplification, compensation, normalization or naturalization, and finally explication [Pošta, 2011: 62-67].

While nowadays translators of subtitles are considered “multifunctional” as “it is the subtitler’s job to spot the production and translate and write the subtitles in the (foreign) language required” [Carroll – Ivarsson, 1998: 1], the technical aspect of subtitling should not be neglected. Although timing of the subtitles or so called *spotting* is becoming redundant since translators simply use a “form of universal template subtitle files in English (also referred to in the profession as the genesis file or the transfile), to be used as the basis for translation into all languages” [Georgakopoulou, 2009: 30]. Even this template has to be created in the first place, therefore we still consider timing subtitles relevant. For this purpose, usually free subtitling software is used in a classroom, such as the already mentioned *Subtitle Workshop* which is freely available [Sierra, 2014: 74].

The third aspect of subtitle teaching with regard to translation market is closely related to so called “praxeology,” that is, teaching the students about the situation on the market and the real-life opportunities for a subtitler. In the Slovak context, we can draw knowledge from the publication of Martin Djovčoš, who in his book *Who, How, and Under What Circumstances Translates (Kto, čo a za akých podmienok prekladá, 2012)* maps the current situation of the translators in Slovakia, including practical matters as freelancing, prices, software and tools. Combined with Pošta’s publication about the subtitling market in the Czech republic, it is possible to draw attention to matters such as the lack of subtitlers’ professional organizations, low financial reward, low awareness in the academia, with the goal to enlighten these problems and suggest improvements, such as: 1. Establishment of a professional organization; 2. Teaching subtitling at universities; 3. Research based on translation studies and cognitive sciences; 4. Well-founded criticism [Pošta, 2011: 15].

Merging amateur subtitles and teaching

We summarize and suggest classroom activities using amateur subtitles in order that students understand not only the technical and translation-related aspects of subtitling, but also the socio-cultural aspect relating to market and the Slovak context using an example of amateur subtitles for the movie *Crimson Peak* from the site *titulky.com* by the author writing under a pseudonym. These are as follow:

1. Text analysis and socio-cultural aspects;
2. Translation criticism and feedback;
3. Observing technical aspects;
4. Comparing official and amateur subtitles.

Text analysis as a first part of subtitle analysis process may be based on Nord’s text analysis, with goals to distinguish the extratextual and intratextual factors relating to the subtitles as a basis for predicting the problems that might arise with the translation itself. Nord defines extratextual analysis in terms of inquiring about

“the author or sender of the text (who?), the sender’s intention (what for?), the addressee or the recipient the text is directed at (to whom?), the medium or the channel the text is communicated by (by which medium?), the place (where?), and time (when?), of the text production and the text reception, and the motive (why?) for communication” [Nord, 1991: 36].

In terms of intratextual analysis, Nord talks about

“the subject matter the text deals with (on what subject matter?), the information or content presented in the text (what?), the knowledge presupposition made by the author (what not?), the composition or the construction of the text (in what order?), the non-linguistic or paralinguistic elements accompanying the text (using which non-verbal elements?), the lexical characteristics (in which words?) and syntactic structures (in what kind of sentences?) found in the text, and the suprasegmental features of intonation and prosody (in which tone?)” [Nord, 1991: 37].

In case of our example, the amateur subtitles for the 2015 movie *Crimson Peak* we can observe the following extratextual characteristics: the sender is anonymous, or using a pseudonym, the recipient is the audience which cannot speak English, the medium is internet, precisely the site

titulky.com, which contains Slovak and Czech subtitles. The subtitles appeared online on November 15. The motive was to allow the audience to enjoy the movie before it is released on a DVD. All these extratextual factors are very common for amateur subtitles and they differ from usual literary translation in almost all the points. The students should therefore arrive at the following conclusions:

- The authors of amateur subtitles wish to remain anonymous in most cases, unlike a book translator, whose name is known,
- the intention of the sender is to *share* with no financial reward, only praise or personal satisfaction,
- internet as a medium allows for a fast and wide spread of the text,
- amateur subtitles appear as soon as a copy of a movie is available online,*
- the motive is related to the Slovak subtitling market often depending on Czech subtitles.†

The intratextual analysis can be related with translation criticism when expecting and identifying translation problems and strategies. The subject matter as a literary translation should not prove exceptionally difficult (regarding the absence of specific terminology encountered with technical translation). The knowledge presupposition, however, will be limited, because the subtitler worked with only the video as a source material (not a transcript), which is not recommended [Carroll-Ivarsson 1998:1]. Therefore we may expect encounter omissions or mistakes due to misheard expressions. Also the non-linguistic and paralinguistic aspect of the source material must be stressed since it is a video, not a regular text. The remaining lexical characteristic and syntactic structures relate to the dialogic nature of the movie, direct speech and the setting (in our case, Victorian England).

It is also important to address the question of the subtitling market. Why do amateur subtitles emerge in the first place? How fast do they emerge? What can we deduce from such observations? All these questions and their possible answer relate to the current status of the popular media in the Slovak republic and worldwide and to the demands of the audience and the market.

The reason for which amateur subtitles emerge worldwide is very simple and practical, as Ramsey Isler illustrates on the example of Japanese anime series in The United States:

“Anime companies have made the mistake of assuming that U.S. audiences will patiently wait for months or years to see series that are hot in Japan. The crux of the problem is that fans want the latest thing from Japan, right now! The fansub translation phenomenon shortens the time it takes for rabid anime fans to get their fix, as well as providing access to series that may never see an official U.S. release,” [Isler, 2008: 2].

We could apply the same viewpoint to the Slovak context. Since the internet provides access to any series airing abroad, the audience does not want to wait several years for a Slovak translation, whether in the form of dubbing or subtitles, appearing on the television. However, the Slovak context stands very close to the Czech context, and is often influenced by it. Specifically, in the area of the popular media and even subtitling, we often encounter usage of Czech subtitles even with the Slovak editions of films, as well as Czech dubbing in Slovak television. This import of Czech language is, however, only one-way [Chorvát, 2013: 1] and constitutes a dilemma which many sociolinguists try to solve. The mention of the Czech context in relation to amateur subtitles is important, because the Slovak audience often uses these and Slovak subtitlers do not even bother to create a Slovak version since the Czech one is already available.‡

One of the basic characteristics of amateur subtitles is that they emerge fast, even a few hours after the source material in the form of a video is available online. Most commonly, people who create these subtitles do not necessarily have to be translators, although they might be, as in the case of a Slovak subtitler Matej Laš, who studies translation and interpreting and spends about twelve hours creating subtitles for a 45-minute TV show episode [Mikušovič, 2015: 1]. In an

* TS illegal copy version of the crimson Peak appeared online on November 5, while the subtitles were available as soon as November 10.

† The official Slovak DVD copy contains only Czech subtitles and only Czech/English audio.

‡ Using the popular television series *Game of Thrones* as an example, we can see that the website with Czech and Slovak amateur subtitles *www.titulky.com* offers no Slovak, only Czech subtitles for the episode that aired the night before, May 1.

interview, a subtitler using a pseudonym *Larelay* says she considers amateur subtitles better than the official ones [Pošta, 2011: 141] and the official subtitlers often underestimate the audience, using too much simplification and too low CPS (characters per second).*

This analysis gives basis to expected translation strategies and problems we can find in translation criticism, whether it is positive criticism to highlight the applicable strategies or negative criticism to learn from the subtitler's mistakes. After establishing the basic intratextual and extratextual text characteristics, we can move on to translation criticism itself.

First of all, as we have mentioned, amateur subtitles tend to be of better quality regarding the technical aspects, but of worse quality regarding translation and "mistakes tend to be fairly common" [Cintas – Sánchez, 2006: 47]. It is this technical quality that can serve as an adequate example for the students, while they can still observe translation strategies that the translator used or failed to use and suggest changes or improvements. Another purpose of amateur subtitles in classroom is therefore to subject them to analysis and translation criticism, asking the question "how do we know when a translation is good?" [House 2001: 243] Translation criticism, however, does not only serve to highlight the negative related to the frequent mistakes, but also the positive solutions and strategies [Simpson 1975: 255]. The students should be aware of translation shifts as defined by Popovič and be able to identify them:

"1. Macro-Stylistics (Thematic Composition)

- a) Modernization → Zeitbezug
 - b) Localization → Ortsbezug
 - c) Adaptation → Sachbezug
2. Micro-Stylistics (Language → Style)

- a) Intensification of Expression
 - i. Standardization of Expression
 - ii. Individualization of Expression
- b) Correspondence of Expression
 - i. Substitution of Expression
 - ii. Transformation of Expression
- c) Attenuation of Expression
 - i. Leveling of Expression
 - ii. Loss of Expression, [Popovič, 1975: 130, in: Špirk, 2009: 16].

In our case, we can highlight several examples of translation strategies including those from theory of Newmark, Graedler, Harvey [Ordudari, 2007: 1] and Popovič with Pošta. Although we cannot provide a thorough criticism, which is suitable for a work of a larger extent; we provide a few examples, which should be categorized into shifts caused by the restrictive nature of subtitles and shifts arising from translation as such.

We perceive shifts arising from the restrictive nature of subtitles (time and space) as those defined by Pošta [2011: 62], specifically simplification, normalization and explication. Simplification may arise as most commonly to limited characters of subtitles (A name, a patch of land and and the **will to make it yield...** - S menom, pozemkom a s **odhodlaním**), where the expression "will to make it yield" become simply "will," not related to the context of land. Normalization is closely linked to generalization, arising from an effort to adjust culturally specific realia to the target language (I'm submitting it to the **Atlantic Monthly...** - Posielam to do **novín...**), where the name of the newspapers was omitted and substituted with a general term "newspaper." Explication is, on the contrary, an effort to explain these realia to the target audience.

The remaining of translation shifts and strategies are not linked to the nature of subtitles and may arise in any media. Several examples include transformation of expression (Goodness, with the **great man** himself... - No toto, hned' s **veľkým šéfom...**), where the great man became a great chief, substitution of expression (Stubborn to the bone. - Zafatá ako mulica.), which is a natural process substituting proverbs with those typical for the receiving culture, word-for-word translation, omissions and additions.

* Characters per second indicate the reading speed of the audience – the more characters appear in one second, the faster they need to be read. Also used as an acronym CPS.

It is the positive solutions and strategies, that, with amateur subtitles are very closely related to feedback and the possibility to edit the subtitles anytime. It is the user feedback that gives the students a chance to see *a) what does the audience require from the subtitler* and *b) how does the subtitler react to these requirements*. It is interesting to note that very few academic works mention feedback as a didactic tool, if they mention feedback at all in relation to amateur subtitles. However, feedback is important in the field of translation studies and closely related to translation criticism. While with literary translation like books, feedback does usually not help to improve the translation since the book is already printed and cannot be edited, with amateur subtitles the situation is different. Adam Rush acknowledges this possibility with amateur subtitles, saying that “forums and chat rooms allow for instant feedback to the fansub producers, so that they can respond to fan requests and suggestions” [Rush, 2009: 1]. These requests and suggestions are often applied to the existing text file not once, but continuously, providing room for subtitles to become better every time a change is made. As some authors feel there might be “relatively little discussion of language issues in specific fansubs” [Benson-Chan, 2010: 5], it is necessary to bring such discussion forth in order to address the language and translation issues, which can providing a necessary basis for educational purposes.

Feedback can be perceived in the form of thanks, request to change the translation, request to re-spot the subtitles (adapt the timing for another version of the film) as often perceive on the website containing amateur subtitles (titulky.com). In our case, there were numerous thanks, several requests to re-spot the subtitles and some praise for the translator on doing a good job and we have encountered no negative criticism.

The technical aspects of subtitling should focus on the basics like timing, CPS (Characters per second), length of subtitles using recommendations from *Code of Good Subtitling Practice* by Mary Carroll and Jan Ivarsson or *A Proposed Set of Subtitling Standards in Europe* by Fotios Karamitroglou, which both mention the most basic technical requirements, such as:

- Maximum two lines in one subtitle,
- number of characters should be limited to forty,
- maximum duration of a full two-line subtitle should be around 6 seconds,
- maximum duration of a full single-line subtitle should be around 3 seconds,
- CPS recommended to 12,
- punctuation according to the standards of the recipient country should be used. [Pošta, 2011; Carroll – Ivarsson, 1988; Karamitroglou, 1997]

All these requirements can be tested by loading the subtitles into a subtitling program *Subtitle Workshop* and watching the video with the subtitles in order to find any discrepancies, while displaying technical information on the tools panel. These information show the number of errors including too short pauses between subtitles, dialogues in one line, exceeding character number in a line, longest and short line. Using the selected film as an example, we can establish how amateur subtitles reflect theory in several aspects:

- subtitles with more than two lines – zero cases,
 - maximum characters in one line - 43, which is over the established 40 limit, although only by three characters,
 - maximum duration subtitle – exceeds the six second limit by two seconds,
 - shortest duration subtitles complies with the minimum limit one second,
 - average CPS is 12, complying with the recommended CPS [Pošta, 2011: 49].
- The errors displayed by the program are as follow:
- unnecessary spaces (removable by using search and replace function),
 - too short pauses between subtitles (it is recommended to use at least 0.08 or 0.16 second pause),
 - an error of dialogue in one line, which should be divided into two lines,
 - too many CPS (e.g. 61 characters for 3.35 seconds),
 - too long duration in case of the 8 second subtitle.

Using these information and errors can help see that there are no major technical mistakes in amateur subtitles, and the minor ones can be easily fixed (divide subtitle into two lines, shorten the duration, delete unnecessary spaces, etc.) and in terms of technical quality, the subtitles cannot be considered substandard.

Comparing amateur subtitles and professional, or official subtitles has become a subject of many articles and final theses, such as *Comparing professional and amateur translations of word play in How I met your mother* [Paajoki, 2012], *Compliments in fansubs and in professional subtitles: The case of Lost* [Bruti, 2015] focusing on the reception, *Honorifics in Korean Drama: a Comparison of Translation Procedures between Amateur and Professional Subtitlers* [Rossum, 2015] approaching translation of subtitles for drama.

The comparison of such subtitles can yield answers to several questions, including the status of subtitles on the market, since one has to choose a medium that has both official and amateur subtitles. The problem to find such a medium is not based on the lack of amateur subtitles, but rather on the lack of official subtitles, indicating the neglect to provide such subtitles from the side of the film distributors in Slovakia. Students should also be encouraged to do translation criticism of both amateur and professional subtitles in their final theses, providing feedback which is often lacking in the latter case. The comparison of subtitles can also answer questions about quality, which can correspond with Pošta's view that amateur subtitles are technically more advanced, but in terms of translation, the quality of professional subtitles is higher. However, not all authors agree with Pošta's view, some of them finding that "no significant differences between the professional and the amateur translators could be detected" [Paajoki, 2012: 20] and the existing theses by students (although in Czech context) such as *The Comparison of Amateur and Professional Subtitling of the TV series Game of Thrones* found that regarding the comparison of such subtitles, "tendencies of amateur and professional are rather similar" [Platošová, 2013: 41].

Conclusion

In the presented article we focus on using amateur subtitles as a didactic tool for subtitle teaching, based on the interdisciplinary approach using text analysis, translation criticism and technical aspects of subtitles. At first we focus on subtitling in general, highlighting the current situation in Slovakia, which has been lacking in the area of subtitling compared to foreign context. We could say that Slovakia's golden age of subtitling has begun only in the 21st century, relating to many academic publications and events, such as the 2016 conference *Audiovisual Translation: Dubbing and Subtitling in the Central European Context*.

The overall aim of the article is to show how amateur subtitles can help students learn subtitling. Amateur subtitles, or fansubs, have been present since around the 1980s and emerged with Japanese anime series, which have found an audience mostly in the United States. Later, they became one of the most common and widespread representation of fan contributions to translation despite its doubtful legal status. The characterization of amateur subtitles is as follows: higher technical quality, lower quality of translation, speed and immediate feedback.

It is because of the higher number of mistakes that the students can subject the subtitles to translation criticism, again, not only highlighting the negative issues, but finding the positive solutions as well. We provide several examples of such criticism using an example of amateur subtitles for the movie *Crimson Peak*, preceded by the text analysis of intratextual and extratextual factors. The specifics of amateur subtitles are reflected in the non-financial motive of the translator, internet as a medium of transmission and the possibility of immediate and fast feedback.

The presented classroom activities also include comparing official and professional subtitles and using *Subtitle Workshop* to check the technical side of the subtitles, such as the length, number of lines, and the characters per second.

Based on all the presented phenomena and characteristics, we believe that fansubbing or amateur subtitles can be used in the classroom for teaching subtitles due to their usability not only in relation to translation studies, but also to the technical aspects of timing and to the real market demands and opportunities. Therefore, they can provide an integral part for subtitle teaching which can be adapted to the specific needs of a selected country, since the situation might differ from state to state. This multidisciplinary approach based on translation studies and translation technology combined with the practical aspect of subtitling market can help the students to be prepared for the future job as a translator of subtitles for either movies or television shows.

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