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Subtitling Norms in Greece and Spain

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Introduction

By simply watching subtitled films in Greece, traditionally considered a subtitling country, and Spain, a dubbing country, certain differences in this professional practice audiovisual translation may easily be observed. In this chapter the aim is two-fold: first, to look into the factors that guide translators' decisions in the process of subtitling in these two countries, by finding indications of norms; second, closely related to the first, to explore the relationship between the subtitles and the other elements of the audiovisual text. The main premises are that the use of descriptive tools can overcome the limitations posed by prescriptive approaches and that there are regularities in the practice of subtitling.

Norm theory has contributed in a major way to the evolution of Descriptive Translation Studies by introducing an evaluative element. Indeed, the mere description of translation behaviour for its own sake may not provide useful results, whereas the study of norms is bound to give insight into the intersubjective sense of what is 'proper', 'correct', or 'appropriate', in other words, the content of norms (Hermans 1999: 82). According to Toury (1995: 54), translators have to acquire a certain set of norms which will lead them towards adopting a suitable behaviour and help them manoeuvre among all the factors which may constrain it. In the case of subtitling, these factors concern mainly time and space constraints, which, until recently, have attracted primary attention in the discussions about subtitling and AVT. Here it is argued that a shift from a discussion of the constraints themselves to the factors that guide the translators in their work may prove useful.

Since norms are not directly observable, a possible approach is a study of their manifestation, whether textual or extra-textual – two major sources of reconstruction of translational norms suggested by Toury (ibid). The focus here is on textual sources of norms,

that is, regularities in the choices made by subtitlers, as manifested in translated films. In addition, the findings will be compared to the ones encountered in extra-textual sources.

The theoretical starting point of the discussion is based on the categorizations of norms made by Toury (1995) – initial, preliminary and operational (subdivided into matricial and textual) norms – and by Chesterman (1997) – expectancy and professional norms (subdivided into the accountability, the communication and the relation norms). The reason for the choice of both categorizations is that they cover the same areas but from a different perspective.

In this chapter the focus is on matricial and relation norms. The former affect the textual segmentation of the linguistic material and its distribution, or, expressed in the terminology of the practice of subtitling, the spotting of the original script, that is its division into "chunks" to be translated, and the cueing of the subtitles, that is the designation of their in and out times. Relation norms on the other hand stipulate that an appropriate relation of relevant similarity should be established and maintained between the source and the target text, where 'equivalence' or 'optimal similarity' is only one of the possible kinds of relation. Other parameters covered include the addition or omission of information, as well as the relation to accompanying channels, for example, synchronisation between speech and the emergence of subtitles on screen.

Another aspect to be discussed concerns expectancy norms. Adapting Chesterman's (1997) definition to the case of subtitling, they reflect the expectations that viewers of subtitled audiovisual programmes have with regard to what the subtitled product should be like. They are formed by the prevalent subtitling tradition in the target culture and by the previous viewing of subtitled films. In this sense, it can be argued that the expectation norms in Spain and Greece are bound to differ, since the first country is characterised by a tradition in dubbing and not subtitling.

The nature of audiovisual texts

Before proceeding to an analysis of the texts, it may be useful to examine the nature of the audiovisual text, and the features that distinguish it from other kinds of text[1]. Characterised by its reception through two channels, the acoustic and the visual, its other distinctive feature is the importance of the nonverbal element. As pointed out by Zabalbeascoa (1997), all texts contain some nonverbal elements, since the message cannot be delivered without

some sort of physical support. In a film, however, the nonverbal elements, acoustic in the form of noises and music or visual such as images, appear to a much greater extent than in written texts.

Still, not all texts containing these characteristics are under discussion here, and more parameters have to be considered in order for any study to be defined with precision. One of these parameters is the medium: audiovisual texts appear on a screen whether big or small. The fact that nowadays films can be viewed not only at the cinema or on a television set but also on a computer screen, calls for another delimiting parameter which will define audiovisual texts as opposed to hypertexts, received through the same medium. The images in a hypertext, such as a web page, can be static or moving, whereas the audiovisual text always includes moving images. The difference between the two kinds of text when they include moving images is that the latter contains a predetermined succession of non-repetitive images in absolute synchronisation with the verbal elements. Another differentiating factor is interactivity: in the case of hypertexts the receivers decide the sequence of the elements, according to their needs, whereas the audiovisual text cannot be altered. The only possibility of intervention on the part of the receiver is the case of a video-tape or a DVD where the viewer can backtrack or 'move' within the film. The features that distinguish the audiovisual text can be recapitulated as follows:

- Reception through two channels: acoustic and visual.
- Significant presence of the nonverbal element.
- Synchronization between verbal and nonverbal elements.
- Appearance on screen – reproducible material.
- Predetermined succession of moving images – recorded material.

These features condition the translation of the audiovisual text, and, as a result, their consideration is fundamental for its study.

The combination of the acoustic and the visual channels, together with the verbal and the nonverbal elements, result in four basic elements of the audiovisual text: the acoustic verbal (dialogue), the acoustic nonverbal (score, sounds), the visual nonverbal (image) and the visual-verbal element (subtitles)[2]. In this light, and for the purposes of the present analysis, the set of subtitles is viewed as forming part of the translated text, not as

constituting a translation product by itself. In other words, the original, untranslated film is considered to be the source text and the subtitled film the target text.

The spatiotemporal relationships between the four above-mentioned elements may be seen in the Figure 1, where the solid arrows represent existing relationships in an audiovisual text and the dashed arrows represent the relationships established by the subtitler[3].
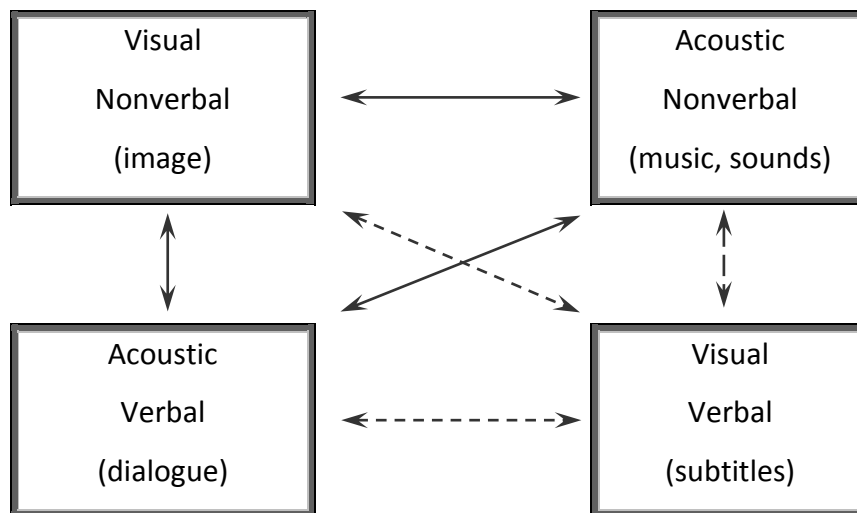
Visual Nonverbal (image)	Acoustic Nonverbal (music, sounds)
Acoustic Verbal (dialogue)	Visual Verbal (subtitles)

Figure 1: Spatial and temporal relationships between the basic elements of the subtitled audiovisual text

In the source text, the temporal relationship that exists between the images, the sounds and the dialogue is characterised by an inherent synchronisation. Logically, the same quality is bound to be required between the subtitles and the rest of the elements of the target text; subtitles will be expected to appear more or less when the character begins to speak and to disappear when s/he stops.

In search of norms

The texts under study comprise the subtitled versions in Spanish and Greek of the films *The English Patient,[4]* the 162-minute film directed by Anthony Minghella in 1996 and *Notting Hill,[5]* the 124-minute comedy directed by Roger Michell in 1999. A first quantitative and comparative analysis between the two sets of subtitles shows a significant difference in the number of subtitles, as shown in Table 1.

Even though the above are the only films analysed in this chapter, there is more evidence regarding the higher number of subtitles in the Spanish versions compared to the

Greek versions, as can be seen in the analysis of the movies *The Perfect Storm,*[6] the 129-minute adventure directed by Wolfgang Petersen in 2000, and *Manhattan Murder Mystery,*[7] the 104-minute comedy directed by Woody Allen in 1993 (see Table 2).

	Greek sub/s	Spanish sub/s	Additional sub/s in Spanish
The English Patient	955	1358	42.1%
Notting Hill	1052	1754	66.7%

Table 1: Comparison between the numbers of subtitles in the films *The English Patient* and *Notting Hill*

	Greek sub/s	Spanish sub/s	Additional sub/s in Spanish
The Perfect Storm	915	1396	52.5 %
Manhattan Murder Mystery	1449	1944	34.1 %

Table 2: Comparison between the numbers of subtitles in *The Perfect Storm* and *Manhattan Murder Mystery*

This difference in number of subtitles can be attributed to two factors:

a) Difference in dialogue omission: where there is omission in the translation of the acoustic verbal element in Greek there are subtitles in Spanish.

b) Difference in distribution: one Greek subtitle consisting of two lines corresponds to two Spanish subtitles consisting of one line each.

The question to be answered at this point is: why are there 403 'additional' subtitles in the Spanish version of *The English Patient* and 702 in *Notting Hill*? In the first film, 48.9% (197 subtitles) of this difference is due to the first factor mentioned above, that is, these subtitles are present in Spanish but omitted in Greek. As for the remaining 51.1% of the difference (206 subtitles), it is caused by the second factor, that is, by the fact that two Spanish one-liners correspond to one Greek two-liner. Accordingly, in *Notting Hill,* 64.9% (456 subtitles) of the difference is attributed to the first factor and the rest 35.1% (246 subtitles) to the second factor.

Indeed, the analysis of the amount of subtitles consisting of one or two lines shows that there is a preference for two-liners in the Greek versions and for one-liners in the Spanish ones, as shown in Figure 2.
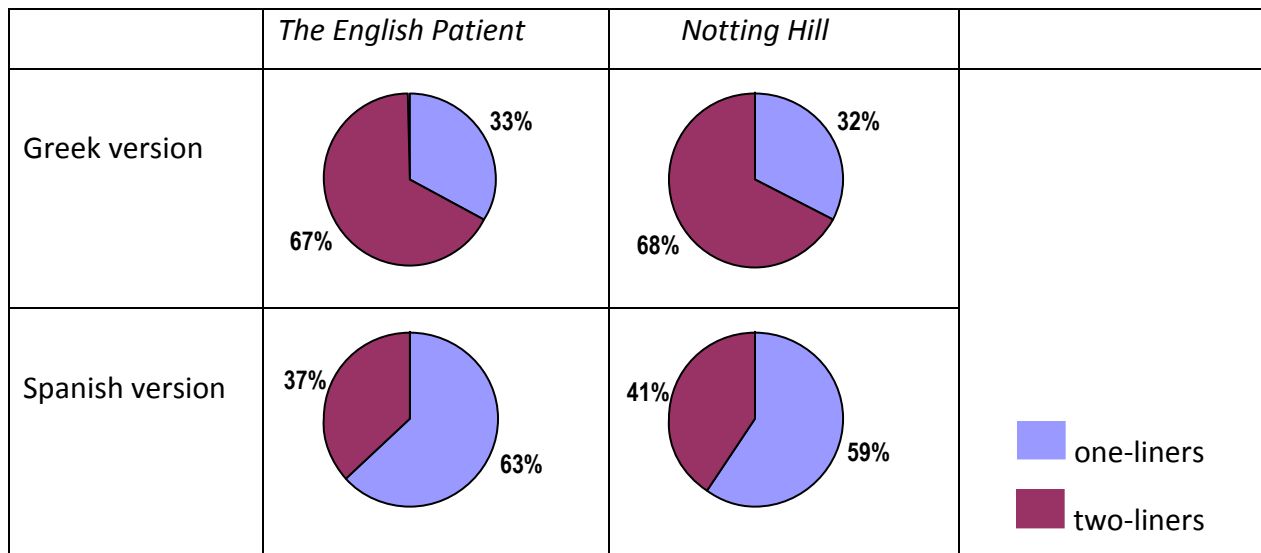
	The English Patient	*Notting Hill*	
Greek version	33% 67%	32% 68%	
Spanish version	37% 63%	41% 59%	one-liners / two-liners

Figure 2 Percentages of one-liners and two-liners

The next step in the analysis is to find out the factors that determine the choices related to the distribution and the omission of subtitles in each language. Let us look at a couple of examples where a two-liner in Greek corresponds to two one-liners in Spanish. The first one is from *The English Patient.*

Caravaggio: Apparently, we're neighbours. My house is two blocks from yours in Montreal.			
Spanish	Somos vecinos. Vivimos… a 2 manzanas de Montreal.	**Greek**	Βγήκαμε γείτονες. Μένω πολύ κοντά σου στο Μόντρεαλ.

Example 1

It can be observed that in the Spanish version a second subtitle is introduced, even though both lines could fit in one subtitle. Assuming that this choice is not random, what seems to determine the specific decision by the subtitler is the existence of a cut, that is a change from one image (a close-up of Hanna) to another (showing both Hanna and Caravaggio). This norm operating in Spanish can also be found in extra-textual sources, more specifically in articles written by Spanish professionals like Castro Roig (2001:280) who states that 'whenever there is a cut, there must be a new subtitle' (my translation), a normative statement that is repeated by Leboreiro Enríquez and Poza Yagüe (2001).

This is also the case in Example 2 from *Notting Hill,* where the second speaker follows almost immediately after the first one. In Greek there is one subtitle consisting of two lines,

whereas the Spanish subtitler has chosen to create two separate subtitles in order to respect the visual nonverbal element, that is the shot change.

	Will: Right, that's it. Sorry. Anna: No, there's really no point.		
Spanish	Vale, se acabó.	**Greek**	- Με συγχωρείς μια στιγμή. - Όχι. Δεν πειράζει.
	No, no vale la pena.		

Example 2

In many cases, the difference in lexical distribution is determined by the influence (or absence of influence) of the acoustic nonverbal element, namely pauses in the characters' speech. This can be seen in Example 3 from *Notting Hill* where the dialogue is characterised not only by many pauses in speech, but also by a high number of false starts.

	Anna: Tempting, but… no. Thank you		
Spanish	Tentador,…	**Greek**	Δελεαστικό... αλλά... όχι, ευχαριστώ.
	…pero…		
	…no.		
	Gracias.		

Example 3

In Example 3 we can see that there are four Spanish subtitles when the Greek subtitler has decided to use only one. The distribution of subtitles in Spanish seems to be determined by the pauses in the Anna's speech, whereas in Greek it appears to be the direct consequence of the norm which stipulates that, where possible, each subtitle must have a complete meaning in itself. The extra-textual source for this norm consists of a questionnaire directed to Greek professional subtitlers (Sokoli, 2000). One of the outcomes of the analysis of the questionnaires indicates that completeness of meaning in each subtitle is considered one of the main characteristics of good subtitling. A technique often used in order to indicate the existence of pauses is the use of triple dots, as in Example 3.

An observationthat has to be made concerning the Spanish versions is that there are quite a few examples where there is both a pause and a cut, and the subtitler has to choose between cueing the subtitle according to one of the two. It has been found that in all these

cases, priority is given to the norm which requires synchronisation with the acoustic element; in other words, the cueing in of the subtitle will be done when the next part of the utterance begins and not when there is a cut.

The next step in the analysis is to examine the difference in the choice of omissions, more specifically, the cases where an acoustic verbal element has an equivalent subtitle in the Spanish but no subtitle in the Greek version. Example 4 is from *Notting Hill.*

Anna: Hi. William: Hello. Anna: You disappeared. William: Yeah...yeah. I had to leave. I didn't want to disturb you.			
Spanish	Hola.	**Greek**	-
	Hola.		-
	Desapareciste.		Εξαφανίστηκες.
	Sí, sí.		-
	Tuve que irme, no quería molestar.		Έπρεπε να φύγω. Δεν ήθελα να σ'ενοχλήσω.

Example 4

In the Greek version, even though there are no time or space constraints, the greeting between the two characters and the almost inaudible 'yeah...yeah' are omitted in the subtitles. These choices do not seem to be random and the norm which possibly governs them can be found in the results of the previously mentioned questionnaire: a high percentage of the Greek subtitlers involved stated that they omit utterances that they consider either easily recognisable by the Greek audience, (such as 'OK', 'hello', 'yes', 'no', etc., names, repetitions), or not relevant to the plot, (hospital or airport announcements, songs etc.). Moreover, it was pointed out that, despite the absence of time or space constraints, such utterances are often omitted in order for the viewers to have time to enjoy the image. These are utterances which can be recovered by other elements of the audiovisual text:

- The acoustic verbal (recognisable utterances, names, etc.).
- The acoustic nonverbal (phatic elements, exclamations, etc.).
- The visual verbal (repetition found in other subtitles, etc.).
- The visual nonverbal (objects in the image, etc.).

- A combination of all or some of the above elements.

It is clearly difficult, if not impossible, to mark a clear-cut distinction between the elements of the audiovisual text, since these are closely interrelated. The argument here is that the omitted utterances are *mainly* and not *only* recoverable from these elements. Example 5 comes from *The English Patient.*

Katharine: Stop! Here! Over here! Stop! Madox! Almasy: Madox! Madox!			
Spanish	¡Estamos aquí!	**Greek**	Εδώ!
	¡Aquí!		-
	¡Pare!		Σταματήστε!
	¡Madox!		-
	¡Madox!		-
	¡Madox!		-

Example 5

In the Spanish version, there seems to be a norm stipulating that there must be as few omissions as possible, which is also extra-textually corroborated by Diaz Cintas (1997:281). In an analysis of the subtitled version of *Mystery Murder in Manhattan* in Spanish he finds that there is a tendency for what he calls *sobretraducción* [overtranslation]. According to this scholar, the specific phenomenon is explained by 'the intention that the viewer can have the feeling of not being cheated, and of having all the information contained in the original version' (my translation). He provides examples similar to the ones above – such as *Sí, sí, ¿Helen?, ¡Jack!* – and considers these subtitles unnecessary for the comprehension of the plot since they are of purely phatic or vocative nature. Moreover, according to the answers given by Spanish subtitlers to the questionnaire discussed above, the spectator must not be left to feel that there is any missing subtitle, and consequently a subtitle must appear every time an utterance is heard.

In order to study the relation between the acoustic and the visual verbal elements, I have borrowed a relevant categorisation from the discipline of Artificial Intelligence, relating to the basic possible relationships between two intervals. According to Allen (1983) there are 13 such relationships, as indicated in Table 3.

Relation	Symbol	Symbol for inverse	Pictorial example
x before y	<	>	xxxx yyyy
x equal y	=	=	xxxx yyyy
x meets y	m	mi	xxxxyyyy
x overlaps y	o	oi	xxxx yyyy
x during y	d	di	xxxx yyyyyyyy
x starts y	s	si	xxxx yyyyyy
x finishes y	f	fi	xxxx yyyyyy

Table 3 The basic possible relationships between two intervals (Allen, 1983)

Let us now see which are the most frequent temporal relationships between utterances and subtitles. In the Greek versions of the films under analysis it has been found that the subtitles appear some deciseconds (one-tenths of second) after the start of the utterance. In the Spanish ones, on the other hand, the subtitles appear exactly when the utterance begins and finish either when the utterance finishes or some deciseconds after it has finished. If Allen's categorization is used, where x represents the duration of the utterance and y the duration of the subtitle, we have the following most frequent temporal relations between the two:

- Greek: "x overlaps y" (o)
- Spanish: "x equal y" (=) and "x starts y" (s)

As far as the Spanish versions are concerned, the choice for the cueing of the subtitles seems to be governed by the requirement for synchronisation. Naturally, even though it is almost always possible to cue the subtitle in at the beginning of the utterance, the same does not hold for the cueing out, because the specific duration might not be enough for the subtitle to be read. This may explain why both relationships are frequent in Spanish.

A similar assumption of the norm cannot be made for the Greek versions. This is because I have not encountered any extra-textual sources verifying the existence of a norm requiring that subtitles must be inserted a while after the utterance has begun, despite the fact that the specific relationship is the one most frequently met. The regularity of this relationship

could be attributed to certain technical limitations that existed in the past, such as the necessity for manual insertion of subtitles (Sokoli, 2000). Despite the fact that these technical limitations have now been overcome, the lack of a norm requiring absolute synchronisation seems to have led to a confirmation of this practice. Thus, it could possibly be included among the cases that Chesterman (1993:4) describes as 'behavioural regularities [which] are accepted (in a given community) as being models or standards of desired behaviour'.

Conclusion

The above quantitative and qualitative analysis shows that there are indications of the presence of norms in the subtitling practices in Greece and Spain. In particular, there are indications of the operation of the following norms:

- Matricial norms: In Spain, the distribution of subtitles is determined by the acoustic nonverbal (pauses) and the visual nonverbal (cuts) elements. When there is a conflict between the requirements for synchronisation with the acoustic and synchronisation with the visual element, synchronisation with the acoustic element prevails. In Greece, the distribution of subtitles is determined by the requirement for completeness of meaning within the same subtitle and the preference for subtitles consisting of two lines rather than one.

- Relation norms: In Spain, the choice dictating omission is determined by the requirement of "equality" between the acoustic verbal and the visual verbal element. As a result, the omitted utterances are as few as possible. Moreover, there is an effort to avoid disproportion between the duration of the dialogue and the subtitles. In Greece, the choice for omission is determined by the utterance's recoverability from the other elements of the audiovisual text. Recoverable elements are often omitted even in the absence of time and space constraints.

Again, it has to be stressed that these are only indications of the presence of norms and that more films have to be analysed in order for them to be verified. Future research could include the comparison of each set of subtitles with the original dialogue, with the aim to find the degree of language compression, since the only comparison made in the present study has been between the two subtitled versions of each film. Moreover, other films to be studied could belong to different genres (for example action films, documentaries) or have

stricter time and space constraints (for example films with fast dialogue), with the aim to explore the way the above norms are adapted. Another possible line of research involves investigation of the reception of subtitled audiovisual programmes. For example, a subtitled film translated according to the Spanish norms could be shown to a Greek audience, or vice versa, and their response could be examined in order for expectancy norms to be discovered.

Given qualitative and descriptive nature of the present discussion in the absence of laws or absolute truths, possible explanations have been proposed and more hypotheses have been put forward, which in turn may serve as a basis for future research. The results could be used not only for the explanation and prediction of the way subtitles are manifested, but also in a programme of training for subtitlers.

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Notes

[1] The definition of text used here is the one established by de Beaugrande and Dressler (1981), according to which a text has to meet seven standards of textuality: cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativity, situationality and intertextuality. Hence, texts are not only written utterances, in spite of the connotation this word has in everyday language. This definition also accounts for spoken utterances, as well as television and cinema programmes, our present object of study.

[2] Delabastita (1990:101-2) refers to these as 'four types of film sign: verbal signs transmitted acoustically (dialogue), nonverbal signs transmitted acoustically (back-ground noise, music), verbal signs transmitted visually (credits, letters, documents shown on the screen), nonverbal signs transmitted visually'.

[3] The term 'subtitler', as it is used here, does not necessarily refer to one person but it may represent the team of people involved in the subtitling process. Depending on the practice, the same person is responsible for all the steps, whereas in other cases, the spotting and the translation are done by different people (see Georgakopoulou, this volume).

[4] The set of Greek subtitles broadcast on TV is the same as the one appearing in the VHS version (no information available about the cinema or DVD version). As for the Spanish version, only the VHS was available.

[5] In Greece, this film had the same set of subtitles for TV, VHS and DVD (no information was available about the cinema version). In Spain, interestingly enough, there are four different sets of subtitles for each medium and the one used for this analysis is the TV version.

[6] The TV version has been used for both languages.

[7] The VHS version has been used for both languages. See Díaz Cintas (1997) for more details about the subtitling of this film into Spanish.