
AUDIOVISUAL TRANSLATION ON PORTUGUESE NEWS BULLETINS

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Abstract

The daily access to news broadcast is something that, generally speaking, we do not abstain ourselves from, whether it is to be aware of what is going on in our country or to be informed about international events. But are we attentive to how the information about those events, namely those that occur outside Portugal, reaches us? How is that information handled – and who handles it – until we have it at our disposal? Is the audience aware that a large part of the news must be translated and must have a linguistic treatment? And how can we describe that same translation and the way it is presented? This case study is just an example of translation's role and its crucial presence on TV news broadcast, considering the way translation is processed, how it is barely noticed – or not –, how it influences the construction of the story and how the story influences the translation process. This case study was presented at the 2nd International Conference “Media for All”, with the theme “Text on Air, Text on Screen”, which took place at the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria, on 7-9 November 2007.

O acesso diário a serviços informativos noticiosos é algo de que, de um modo geral, não nos privamos, seja para ficar a par do que se passa no nosso país, seja para ficarmos mais informados sobre eventos e acontecimentos internacionais. Mas teremos noção de como essas informações sobre esses acontecimentos, nomeadamente os que têm lugar fora de Portugal, chegam até nós? Qual será o tratamento dado a essas informações – e quem trata essas informações – até serem colocadas à nossa disposição? Será que o público, de um modo geral, se apercebe que grande parte das notícias é alvo de tratamento tradutológico e linguístico? E como se caracterizará essa tradução e a forma de apresentação da mesma? O presente estudo de caso é apenas um exemplo do papel e da presença fulcral da tradução em serviços noticiosos televisivos, seja pela forma como é feita, pelo modo como passa despercebida (ou não), pela influência que terá na construção da peça noticiosa e pela influência que a peça noticiosa terá no modo como se processa a tradução. Este estudo de caso foi apresentado na 2ª Conferência Internacional “Media for All”, subordinada ao tema “Text on Air, Text on Screen”, que teve lugar no Instituto Politécnico de Leiria de 7 a 9 de Novembro de 2007.

Key words

Audiovisual translation (AVT); news broadcast; journalistic television discourse; translation awareness; audiovisual contents.

Tradução audiovisual (TAV); serviços noticiosos; discurso jornalístico televisivo; consciência da tradução; conteúdos audiovisuais.

1. Introduction

As a result of new developments and current interest, newscasts on television have become an element of study by scholars (like Susan Bassnett, Kyle Conway or Claire Tsai) from a wide range of areas within the domains of text linguistics and communication studies. Not much, however, has been done within audiovisual translation (AVT) studies to try to understand what determines the translation solutions applied when presenting international news on television. It is our belief that enlightening findings can be reached if we cross audience shares, news editing processes, information selection, broadcasting styles and the linguistic and translation options. What are the factors that truly determine the translation solutions we are offered on the news each day?

With the hope of finding hints towards a better understanding of the making of AVT in the news, we take on a case study within the Portuguese context. Our *corpus* encompasses three evening primetime news bulletins, broadcast on 16 April 2007 on Portuguese analogue TV channels (RTP1, SIC and TVI)¹. We focus on the piece of news regarding the shooting rampage that took place on that same day at Virginia Technical College, USA, in which an Asian gunman shot students and teachers in two university campuses, killing a large number of people. This dramatic incident was to be turned into a spectacular news event supported by images that stirred up emotions and public involvement. The three Portuguese television channels took up the matter in different ways and imparted on it their own news styles and AVT policies. In order to get a better understanding of the impact that such choices might have had on the audiences of that particular piece of news, we try to establish relationships between the profile of the usual audience of each channel and that of each channel's news bulletins' on the said date. Special emphasis is placed on the news regarding the shooting so as to compare it to the whole news bulletin and to assess its weight and importance in the audience shares.

Our study also involves a linguistic analysis and addresses the importance that the public has in the groundwork of the news discourse, the intention of which is to capture the audience's attention and to ensure its loyalty. To complete this study, we carry out a brief analysis of the news visual and audio composition – verbal and nonverbal – to establish its possible impact on the translation work. We also try to understand how the audiovisual translation of news might differ from other types of AVT – if it does differ at all.

2. News in the making

News are known to be somewhat constructed, they are a representation of reality and, as such, are subject to manipulation. An event must undergo a selection process before it can be turned into a piece of news and the media are responsible for that transformation. This decision is often underpinned by market criteria, which usually override those of public interest. Given that the media at large are increasingly commercially oriented and fight fiercely for audience shares, the outcome of this constant pursuit is reflected on each channel's selection of programmes and on the news singled out for news bulletins, as well as the way in which news is handled. On this matter Brandão (2006:17) comments that televised programmes and information are seen as merchandise produced to attract and provide advertisers with audiences rather than to inform the viewers. The aim of televised information seems now to be the following: to attract the public's interest and to guarantee its loyalty towards a particular TV corporation. As such, televised information attempts to stir the public's emotions, essential in journalism, and which is achieved by dramatising facts, preferably those thought to be violent or unusual (Brandão, 2002:84-5). However, most of the time viewers are not aware that the newscaster is already transforming reality while preparing the journalistic material: the contents are adapted and made suitable for the typical addressee of each news service. In this sense, the news bulletin does not show the fact but rather

a version of it. It is in this handling process, in which linguistic, non-linguistic and paralinguistic discourses are combined, that news are invested with a subjective slant. Indeed, dramatisation must be understood in its dual meaning: on the one hand, the *mise en scène* of the event and, on the other hand, the emphasis given to its dramatic or tragic nature, with the ultimate goal of attracting audiences.

By watching, viewers cooperate with the discourse enunciator, taking on the role of actively participating elements in the communication context. In this way, the journalistic television discourse reveals a discourse elaboration which confers on the viewers not only the role of addressees but that of actors too. The viewers become “actors” because they condition the speaker’s discourse, who wishes to adapt it to the profile of his addressees – or of whoever he believes the addressees to be. This means that although news broadcasting is often seen as a simple instance of unilateral communication at a distance, the journalistic television discourse does not ignore the viewers’ reception and makes use of it in the construction of news. We believe that the notions of interactivity and discourse construction have particular relevance in the analysis of journalistic television discourse. The journalistic television discourse relies on the channel of communication and that contributes for the construction of the message to be conveyed. By fulfilling the phatic function, this discourse establishes itself as a permanent contact between addresser and addressee, fostering an idea of a physical and, by analogy, a personal conversational interaction.

Despite the effort to make news come across as the relay of facts, the journalistic television discourse is not perceived by viewers as unilateral and this is much due to the contribution of introductory formulae such as ‘good afternoon’ or ‘good evening’ which, in the words of Tolson (2006:10), represent “a way of reaching out to the active listener, provoking a basic form of active listenership, as part of the general preference in broadcasting for direct address”. By preparing or constructing their discourse, speakers obviously hope it will be successful with listeners and invest a considerable effort in choosing, among the possibilities made

available in the linguistic system, the options that better promote their intervention. In the case of the newscast, these choices go beyond words and are equally visible in the choice of the images and the sounds to be broadcast. Special attention is given to the way all the elements – words, sound and image – come together and speakers have an idea of how their discourse will be received by the listeners. To ensure that receivers get the intended message the speaker adopts a metacommunicative approach that implies keeping a close control of as many factors as possible that might interfere with the transmission of the intended message(s).

3. The news broadcasting process and its translation

Information sources are particularly important especially when they refer to international news. In the Portuguese context, we would expect the three television stations to resort to “importing” news features. Even though apparently all channels imported the story from the same sources (CNN/Skynews), there are substantial differences between the three channels with regard to the handling of the news on the shooting. For instance, only SIC and RTP made the source explicit by leaving on the CNN logo to reinforce credibility. By watching what is given as the original footage, audiences believe they are gaining access to facts and that the broadcaster is being truthful. A closer analysis shows that the scenes presented on all channels were identical but the duration, the selection of fragments and the presentation order differed. Generally speaking, the news on the shooting absorbed approximately 20.7% of SIC time, RTP1 stood at 11.8% and TVI registered 10.4%. There are various types of information editing and manipulation and a rather relevant focus point on all broadcasts is the presence of inserts in English. Inserts are frequently used on the Portuguese news broadcasting to highlight important information. In many ways they are a summary of the main ideas in the piece. The Portuguese inserts are far more legible when the English ones do not exist, but the

presence of the latter confers authenticity to the information and projects a feeling of immediacy. We can use the various combinations of visual and audible elements to our advantage so that the message is entirely conveyed (avoiding incoherencies), but there are cases in which there is visual noise and, in this case, more is less: the more information is offered, the more difficult it becomes to reach the original goal. In the effort to make viewers believe they are watching the “real thing”, we often find that the screen becomes overloaded and viewers have to deal with far too many stimuli. Let us examine the first example of overloading:



Figure 1: Screen overloading



Figure 2: Screen overloading

In the case of Figure 1, the subtitles are shown without any sort of additional image treatment and overlap the English inserts reducing legibility. Another element that contributes towards visual noise is the presence of the operators’ logos. In the second example, Figure 2, we see that when the broadcaster chooses to divide the screen and follow-up the two situations simultaneously; the result is again screen overloading. Particularly noteworthy is the following example in Figure 3 where it is clear that when there are no subtitles or inserts overlapping, legibility increases:



Figure 3: Enhancement of legibility

The question remains: how much does such overlapping of information contribute towards making news items more credible?

In this news item, all three channels chose subtitling as their elected AVT type when showing the original footage, but in the remaining elements of the news feature they opted for an implicit method: transadaptation or versioning (cf. Gambier, 2003), which entails several types of audiovisual translation. In Portugal it is mandatory that foreign news be directly or indirectly translated. And this is not simply a matter of interlinguistic translation but also one of intercultural translation. In this particular case, all channels complied with national regulations even when there was the urge to be the first to present the news. This competition was to be determinant when choosing among AVT types. In this respect, the AVT strategies used in the pieces we analysed are noteworthy. The most obvious clear-cut element is, indeed, immediacy. It was clear that the broadcasters were playing for time and there was none or very little time for mediation between the reception of the original and its broadcast. This news piece was not necessarily translated by a translator, a fact that shows in many of the translation choices made. Another distinct element is the specificity of the newscast discourse, which on account of its

nature entails various types of discourse. Throughout this process, we do not know whether the translator/journalist received just the fragment s/he was supposed to work on or the entire feature; a matter that will have conditioned his/her work. Whether the translator/journalist has been given indications to follow the designated style of the station remains to be seen, and whether s/he had total freedom of expression (within the limitations of subtitling) or if his/her work is conditioned by the style of the journalist preparing the feature, deciding on issues which s/he would otherwise not choose, namely in terms of lexical choices. For cohesion purposes, we feel that the translator/journalist attempted to respect the lexical field already used by the anchor. The second feature of SIC news illustrates this well: the anchor talks about a *estado de choque* [state of shock] and, further on, in the first subtitling block, the word *chocante* [shocking] is used. This word choice makes one believe that in that particular case journalist and translator coincide, or the later would have taken up the lexical choices of the first either for lack of time or simply for the sake of cohesion. We know that within the same lexical field different options may lead to different interpretations by the public and this particular choice of words played a major role reinforcing the tragic nature of the event.

As far as technical subtitling issues are concerned, with non-existing explicit rules for the Portuguese context, translators working on subtitling normally use universally accepted rules that allow them to establish minimum norm and deviating parameters much in the sense of the norms of usage proposed by Chesterman (1997) for translation in general. Technical parameters such as position, number of lines, colours and formatting seem to be tackled by subtitlers on the basis of common sense. This tends to lead to compromise readability. With regard to text segmentation, RTP1 seems to be the channel that respects the sentences' syntactic structure the most, dividing them into logical syntactic units. Generally speaking, SIC also takes this into account. TVI is concerned with the

syntactic structure but, on some occasions, when this could have happened, this structure has not been respected.

Let us now focus on a descriptive comparative analysis of some subtitles which are worth a closer look. We will analyse the following example extracted from an interview which appears both in the RTP1 and SIC news bulletins (Table 2).

Table 1: Word choice and editing

ST: I don't understand why they would do something like this. It seems really senseless and it's really hard just to think about it...		
	RTP1	SIC
Sub 1	<i>Parece não fazer sentido nenhum</i> [It doesn't seem to make any sense]	<i>Não percebo porque fariam uma coisa destas.</i> [I don't understand why would they do something like this.]
Sub 2	<i>e é muito difícil pensar nisso.</i> [and it is really hard to think about it.]	<i>Parece-me ilógico e é muito difícil pensar num motivo.</i> [It seems illogic and it is very difficult to think about a motive.]

The different editing of the news features led to different translation options of the same text. On RTP1, 'think about it' is translated as is - 'pensar nisso' (back translation: 'think about it'). The referent of the expression is not clear but the idea conveyed by the original is also not accurate as there is no referent as occurs on SIC. Because on SIC there has been a previous sentence, 'think about it' that is translated as 'pensar num motivo' (back translation: 'think about a motive'), as the referent 'it' is represented by the whole sentence. The translator was given extra elements allowing him/her extended translation options. The following examples (Table 3 and Table 4) are related to sentence segmentation.

Table 2: Sentence segmentation 1

ST: That was a tragedy that we consider of monumental proportions.		
	RTP1	SIC
Sub 1	<i>É uma tragédia que consideramos</i> [It is a tragedy that we consider]	<i>Hoje a universidade foi atingida por uma tragédia</i> [I don't understand why would they do something like this]
Sub 2	<i>ter proporções monumentais.</i> [of monumental proportions.]	<i>de proporções monumentais</i> [of monumental proportions]

Table 3: Sentence segmentation 2

ST: The university is shocked and deeply horrified with this that befalls us and I want to extend my deepest and most sincere and profound sympathy.			
	RTP1	SIC	TVI
Sub 1	<i>A universidade está chocada e horrorizada com o sucedido.</i> [The university is shocked and horrified with what happened.]	<i>A universidade está chocada e horrorizada</i> [The university is shocked and horrified]	<i>A universidade está chocada e horrorizada por isto</i> [The university is shocked and horrified because this]
Sub 2		<i>por isto nos ter acontecido.</i> [because this has happened to us.]	<i>ter acontecido, e quero prestar as minhas sinceras condolências.</i> [happened to us and I want to extend my sincere condolences.]

TVI does not always respect the syntactic structure of the sentence; the filler-in (amplification) used by the translator – ‘hoje a universidade’ (today the university) – conditioned the structure and division of the subtitles. Similarly, we

feel that the division in the second example is even less appropriate because it affects two subtitles and separates a compound verb. The solutions used by RTP and SIC are more adequate in terms of structure, which contributes to a better readability. We would like to point out that there is generally more subtitling on RTP1 compared to SIC. The difference increases when we compare these to TVI. We believe that the option of using subtitles on RTP1 and SIC news is intentional, with detriment to other procedures; perhaps the largest percentage of subtitling allows the public to be closer to the source. In TVI, we understand there is an inverse situation (less subtitles), which helps a broader public, who prefer to listen to Portuguese than to read subtitles, grasp the message. We feel that linguistic flawlessness is important for both the journalistic and the translation work and we must highlight the role of the television in educating individuals. During the process of making information neutral, certain borderline audiences will be excluded as receivers, namely the elderly, children, immigrants, and others. If there are no adapted contents, the summary function of statements introducing subtitled news blocks is interesting for viewers who might have visual impairment, and who might find it difficult to read subtitles and/or may not master the foreign language. On the other hand, the narrative construction based on sound elements has a negative effect on those with some hearing impairment.

4. Concluding remarks

Given that ours was a very small *corpus* we can only withdraw general conclusions that need to be further pursued in a broader study. The audiovisual planning of news contents seems to reveal the guidelines and agenda of each television station. The analysis carried out suggests that the selection of different elements that operate towards the editing of news features is related to what the stations aim to convey in the features. From what we perceived and from what seems to be the current practice, the selection, editing and set-up of the elements

forming the feature condition the process of translation, namely in terms of lexical choices and grammatical structures. Furthermore, and as part of the audiovisual planning of the contents, we believe that excessive information presented simultaneously (namely the inserts) obstructs viewers' understanding and may even act as a distraction, leaving the public with a less than total perception of the news. The situation worsens when subtitling is needed. Another issue we find important is related to the inclusion of subtitles: reading. There are two elements which we find essential to relate: firstly, we have seen that RTP1 – the station which, according to the shares, presents the public's favourite news bulletin – uses subtitling to a greater extent, a situation which would be truly interesting to confirm in an extended *corpus*. Secondly, this station, which is the one that resorts most frequently to subtitling, has the most widely viewed news bulletin by the 55+ age group. Bearing in mind what we have already said about adapting the contents to the profiles of the viewers, how do we explain that RTP1 subtitles for people over the age of 55, if we take it that such people will probably have poor eyesight due to aging? Further to this element, and taking on another approach to the issue, how do we relate the fact that TVI is the station with less subtitles and the main audience is made up by young people? It is nevertheless interesting to note that, in terms of classes². Class D is the largest consumer of news bulletins and Class C2 follows immediately in its footsteps. Is there a connection between the news bulletin shares and the planning carried out by each station in terms of news bulletins? We realised that Class A/B prefers RTP1, but the vast public of the "Telejornal" is formed by Class D individuals. Is the strategy behind the concept of the features used in this station steered more towards the class that in fact views the news bulletin or does the station try to attract to this time-slot the class that already chooses RTP1 as its favourite station? One of the factors that may have some relevance in this analysis concerns the issue of habit: because RTP is the oldest station in Portugal (over 50 years) and the other stations are more recent (approximately 15 years of activity), it is possible that part of its public has already

been faithful for a long time. According to Hilliard (2000:49), when the intention is to find the appropriate style to write news, it is important to be concise, to keep an informal tone, to be specific, to personalise the data and to be natural. We find these guidelines useful for the journalist and the translator/subtitler alike, having also realised that to write and edit a news article for television involves much audiovisual translation. Both tasks deal with space and time issues and both tasks are ruled by the need to achieve accuracy and clarity to avoid ambiguities. In both situations, the audience will only have one opportunity to read/listen/see what is being said/presented and it is best to avoid redundancies between what is written and what is seen. Taking the above said into account, we are inclined to believe that the competencies of a news audiovisual translator are somewhat similar to that of a journalist, for translation is, itself, making the news indeed.

Notes

1. RTP1 is part of the public television service in Portugal and has been broadcasting since 1957. SIC and TVI are private channels on air since 1992 and 1993 respectively.

2. This classification in “classes” consists on a social stratification largely used by Marktest to characterize audiences, <http://www.marktest.com/wap/a/p/id~23.aspx>: Class A (upper class), Class B (medium/upper class), Class C1 (medium class), Class C2 (medium/low class) and Class D (low class).

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