MULTILINGUALISM AND IDENTITIES:
NEW PORTRAYALS, NEW CHALLENGES

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Abstract

With a dynamic concept of the term “identity” in mind, this introductory paper to the issue Multilingualism and representation of identities in audiovisual texts seeks to investigate the reproduction and representation of (gender, race, ethnicity, nation, etc.) identities. The purpose is to place the centre of attention in identity issues with a wider and more inclusive concept and with a special emphasis on the portrayal of identities in audiovisual products through the research on the translation of language diversity and linguistic varieties.

Resumen

Con un concepto dinámico del término «identidad» en mente, este artículo introductorio al volumen Multilingüismo y representación de las identidades en textos audiovisuales busca indagar en la reproducción y la representación de las identidades (de género, raza, etnia, nación, etc.). El propósito es situar el foco de interés en cuestiones de identidad con un concepto más amplio e inclusivo, con un especial énfasis en la representación de las identidades en productos audiovisuales a través del estudio de la traducción de la diversidad de lenguas y de la variación lingüística.

Keywords: Multilingualism. Portrayal of identities. Audiovisual translation. Language diversity. Linguistic varieties.


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1. Introduction

Identity has become one of the issues with the deepest ideological, political and cultural significance of our times. Translation has not been left aside, but it has become the main leader and the thread of many dialogues around the role that is played by language, and especially by cultures, in the transmission, evolution and even metamorphosis of identities. Audiovisual products, which surround us, also participate in this debate: thanks to translation and new technologies, audiovisual products can be spread worldwide, thus shaping and consolidating different rewritings of multilingual and multicultural identity with an a priori agenda that wants to banish some old stereotypes while at the same time it perpetuates others or even creates new and different ones. Despite the fact that audiovisual translation is seen as a social activity that holds great power (Díaz-Cintas 2012), the reproduction and representation of multilingual and multicultural identities in the context of audiovisual products has become a vast field to be explored (Chaume 2013).

We consider that our priority objective is to focus on matters of identity with a broader and more inclusive concept, and with special emphasis on the representation of identities in audiovisual products. From the perspective of descriptive translation studies, but with a transcultural and markedly ideological approach – in line with the most recent views in this discipline, we present our readers with a series of works which study the translation and representation of identities in multilingual audiovisual texts according to an innovative and enriching variety of lines of research. Considering a dynamic concept of the term “identity” (cf. Hall 1990, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c, 1997), editors and authors believe that it is necessary to research the reproduction and representation of identities in terms of gender, race, ethnic origin, nation, etc. In the current multicultural era, and given that identities (like borders) are increasingly hybrid, multilingualism becomes the undisputed protagonist of their evolution.

When a social group or an individual, like us, uses language to identify itself, we form and define our (multiple, multilingual, multicultural) identities that echo the constructions and images that we, as Self/Selves, project on the
Other. Language, and translation with it, becomes a creator of intersectional identities and, in turn, in a producer of meaning.

Nowadays, therefore, in this globalized era, identity is completely subject to translation, and both concepts are entwined as part of a continuum of transnational discursive practices (and rewritings). What is more, we find that both practices, both in fiction and in reality, are increasingly hybrid and less pure, more multicultural and multilingual. In the words of Michael Cronin (2006: xxx), we defend in the following pages that “one of the functions of translation is to challenge entropic views of cultural mediation and exchange which present diversity as always already and everywhere under threat and which see translation as at best a poor imitation and at worst a dangerous sop”. Translation, identities, multilingualism: three indissoluble pillars for the construction of the “third space” (Bhabha 1994), the space of difference, which is more necessary today than ever before. In the following section we focus on the seed and the development of this branch of study until our days.

2. Identity and multilingualism in audiovisual texts

It is rather problematic to define the coexistence of languages (Moreno Fernández 1998) without succumbing to the temptation of focusing on the necessary degree of linguistic control to consider that a speaker is multilingual. In this volume, the degree of multilingualism that is portrayed in audiovisual texts would be irrelevant. Instead, we analyse the fact that languages do coexist in a specific situation – in this study, audiovisual works of fiction that include more than one language (multilingual discourses according to Bleichenbacher 2008).

It is also difficult to delimit the concept of language. For this reason, the works included in this volume do not focus exclusively on audiovisual texts that reflect the verbal communication systems that are characteristic of a people or a nation. Instead, in line with Blake (1999) and Grutman (2009), we believe that the phenomenon of multilingualism is also present in the texts that integrate a standard variety of the language with standard varieties of that same language in other territories, with nonstandard dialects or with other languages (invented or not), with jargon and with different registers of language.

Research on multilingualism in audiovisual texts and its translation is on the increase. We only have to observe the way in which papers on this topic have proliferated in audiovisual translation conferences over the last years, as well as the organization of specific conferences on this field. In addition, the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness has granted some research projects in the last years to research this topic. This special volume wants to
contribute to the representation of identities that has been studied in monographic volumes about multilingualism that have already been published, properly included in the reference list.

2.1. Multilingualism as language diversity

If we take the research on multilingualism carried out by de Higes Andino (2014) as a starting point, this section devoted to the research of multilingualism in audiovisual texts establishes a difference between the works that approach multilingualism from perspectives that are not part of the translation sphere (mainly from the fields of linguistics and film studies), those that study the visibility of translation in original multilingual texts, and the research around the translation of multilingual audiovisual texts.

From a linguistic perspective, Sternberg’s pioneer work (1981) presents a different range of strategies to reproduce multilingual situations in literature, which is quite often used nowadays to analyse multilingual audiovisual works. Bleichenbacher (2008) analyses the language of multilingual characters in fictional works based on the strategies to portray multilingual discourses in fictional texts by Mareš (2003). Sanaker (2010), for his part, studies the heterolingualism shown in French-speaking cinema.

In the field of film studies, there is a remarkably low number of works that analyse the role of linguistic features in the cinematographic construction of multilingual characters and, consequently, in the diversity of languages in the dialogues. In the case of cinema of migration and diaspora, for example, there are works that study the plot, the role of immigrant characters in the film, lighting, and production (cf. Argote 2003; Santaolalla 2005; Loshitzky 2010; Lacalle 2008; Monterde 2008). As an exception, Kozloff (2000: 33-34) studies the film language and the roles that dialogue plays in the narrative of the audiovisual work. More recently, some works on French cinema have highlighted the importance of language in the construction and expression of ethnic identities in audiovisual works of beur cinema (Johnston 2010) and as a reflection of a decentralization process (King 2017). In addition, Mamula & Patti (2016) have collected together different works on the ways in which diversity and contact between languages have shaped and still shape audiovisual media today.

Kozloff (2000) also focuses on the different possibilities that directors have to make dialogues in a foreign language available, and these options are intrinsically related to the proposals from the vast majority of authors who study audiovisual multilingualism from the perspective of translation studies. They all agree that subtitling, interpreting, non-translation and voice-over are

When multilingual feature films are distributed in countries with native languages that do not match the majority language of the films, “multilingualism becomes both a product of translation and a problem for translation” (O’Sullivan 2011: 176). In the research around the translation of original multilingual films, emphasis is generally placed on the following aspects:


- Conventions used to mark the presence of different languages in audiovisual works with subtitles for the deaf and the hard of hearing: Szarkowska, Żbikowska & Krejtz (2014).


Multilingualism interpreted as language diversity has also been analysed with regard to its humorous function (Chiaro 2007; Delabastita 2010; Zabalbeascoa 2012; de Bonis 2014a, 2015b), to its inclusion as a resource for suspense in thrillers (de Bonis 2014b, 2015b) or as a way of reflecting power (King 2014).

2.3. Multilingualism as diversity of linguistic varieties

Linguistic variation is the theoretical concept used to describe the ways in which language is used according to the communicative situation and the interlocutors that participate in that situation (Hatim & Mason 1990). Therefore, we can establish a difference between linguistic variation based on the use of the language (register, style and mode) and linguistic variation based on the user (the traditional geographic, temporal and social dialects and idiolects, but also linguistic variation based on the gender of the speaker, their ideology and their psychological condition, Arampatzis 2011). Just like language diversity may realistically represent a multicultural society, linguistic variation, and particularly geographic and social dialects, “is another tool that scriptwriters can use to portray the society in which the plot unfolds, thus adding a bit of colour” (Lomeña Galiano 2009: 275)¹. And that touch of colour is precisely what translators try to convey.

In the field of research on the translation of linguistic variation in audiovisual works, the following features are analysed:


¹ Our translation.
We may also point out that there are previous studies that focus on the representation of identity or identities through multilingualism in audiovisual texts before the start of the IDENTITRA project. On the one hand, we can find the works by Beseghi (2011) and Bonsignori (2012) on the representation of the diasporic identity in works that tell the story of Indo-Asian characters in the United Kingdom.

On the other hand, Wau (2012) shows the way in which the diglossia of the target society can be used when subtitling. For his part, Leperlier (2014) analyses the way in which dubbing and subtitling of Sinophone cinema represent the different linguistic identities that make up the linguistic repertoire of the inhabitants of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore.

Finally, Perić (2014) discusses the way in which dialects from Croatian used in the dubbing of animation films are perceived; and the extent to which the dialectal heritage of the viewers has an influence on that perception.

3. New portrayals of identities, new challenges for multilingualism

Taking into account this outlook, the volume we present gathers a number of articles seeking to confront the new reality faced by the topic we are dealing with. The articles by Zabalbeascoa & Corrius, Conde Ruano and Manterola Agirrezabalaga talk about multilingualism and representation of identities from a broader and more theoretical point of view. The research works by Beseghi, Martínez Pleguezuelos & González-Iglesias, Monti and Vidal Sales may be
included among the analysis of translation of language diversity while research
by Gouttefange, Josephy-Hernández, Martínez Tejerina & Sánchez Martínez
and Parra López & Bartoll Teixidor focus on the translation of linguistic variety.

All of them, heterogeneous and complementary both at once, offer a nec-
essary and thought-provoking reading. The state of play of multilingualism is
revisited and updated, taking into account it portrays identities celebrating and
hosting difference, the otherness. Telling and translating are never mutually
exclusive, but as enriching and rewarding practices as true performances of
daily life:

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