How to avoid unwanted responses in audiovisual translation

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Some months ago, I was watching the season finale of The X Files on TV, dubbed in Spanish. I cried while the main characters, Mulder and Scully, tenderly –and finally!- hugged after 7 seasons of close friendship, in a scene reminiscent of one in the pilot. By the end of the episode Mulder had been abducted by aliens and Scully was in hospital. Assistant Director Skinner visited her. Crying, she told him "I'm pregnant". Well, that would be a normal thing to say, if it weren't for the fact that the term she used in Spanish ("Me embaracé") sounded so ridiculous for the Argentine audience that I burst into laughter! The last two words of the translation had ruined the whole thing! To use the right term for this "mistake", the translator had not taken into account one of the basic requirements for a quality translation, which Eugene Nida basically describes as producing a similar response.

This paper will deal with what creates unintended effects. I assume that we all know that provoking unwanted responses is considered to be a fault in the translation. And it is quite obvious: if instead of crying, the audience is laughing, the translator has made a mistake.

This is not new, of course. But we are going to focus on the causes of those mistakes and how to avoid the consequences. I hope that while we are at it, we can have a few chuckles. And although people will not be killed if we mistranslate some expressions from a series (hopefully), we certainly can ruin an episode, or even bring down the ratings, which is why sitcoms like Friends and Seinfeld failed on open TV here while enjoying total success on cable TV.

When we translate, we hope to provoke the same response in the readers (or audience, in this case) as the source text did in the source readers. But obviously, we are "talking" to culturally different people, so we have to be careful. We will now discuss what creates unintended effects and what the translator should know or do to avoid them, and analyze some examples.

The translated (or target) text does not have the ease of original composition

When you listen to a translation like the one in the X Files episode described at the beginning of this paper, or to a phrase like "No **hace** sentido" (instead of "**tiene** sentido", from "**make** sense"), you are instantly reminded that you are listening to a translation. The translator is no longer "invisible". The spell has been broken, and so has one of the criteria for a translation to be good!

The translator is not sufficiently competent in either the source or the target language, or both

This is particularly true of translators who forget, for example, that slang terms are a usual occurrence in AV material. Then you get things like "breeder" translated as "criador" (like in "sheep breeder") in a context where it clearly means "heterosexual" (no common sense either!)

The translator lacks sufficient cultural knowledge

Understanding is based on knowledge, and for an AV translator both knowledge of the world in general and knowledge of the source culture are essential.

When I emphasize the importance of cultural knowledge to my students, I always tell them of a McGyver episode in which the action took place in "Génova, Suiza"!!! Even if Génova is more similar to Geneva than Genoa, no translator can afford not to know where famous cities are.

Another X Files Kodak moment. A woman signs a card: "Love, Sheila XOXO" (as in "hugs and kisses"). Considering that the target audience cannot read English, the dubbed version has the woman reading it aloud: "Con amor, Sheila Xoxo", as if XOXO were Sheila's surname! Well, many viewers must have been puzzled to learn later on in that episode that Sheila had another surname!

Proper names are some AV translators' nightmare. This example is taken from Lois & Clark. Perry White tells Lois: "Me siento como el álamo, pero del lado equivocado" ("I feel like a poplar tree, but on the wrong side"). The Spanish speaking audience was surely wondering what on earth he meant by that. The reference to the famous battle of El Alamo was taken as if he were talking about the alamo tree!

The translator lacks common sense

Well, this problem is very difficult to solve, actually. In an episode of The Nanny, Fran tells Mr. Sheffield: "Don't worry. It's just a phase. She'll get over it". A surely astonished Spanish-speaking audience read something like this in the subtitle: "No se preocupe. Sólo es una cara. Ya se le pasará". ("It's just a face".)

The translator has problems when trying to use "international Spanish"

I must admit this is a real problem. There is no way you can write something that will sound "natural" to audiences in every Latin American country. Some words do not sound so bad, like using "falda" instead of "pollera", or "piña" instead of "ananá", but terms like "portero" don't sound right, and some words even sound offensive or funny (common phrases in one country are insults or vulgar terms in others).

The translator does not have the (written) script
and his/her listening comprehension/phonetics is not that good

I swear these are real examples. Both were taken from Friends, but the episodes were later re-translated (you will soon see why). Phoebe, one of the characters, has a twin sister, Ursula. She says something like this: "My sister and I have not spoken since we shared the same womb." To my surprise, apparently Ursula and Phoebe must have been some kind of larvae before they were born, because in Spanish they shared the same worm! Now here you can see how one problem (poor listening comprehension) combined with no common sense makes for a BIG, FOOLISH MISTAKE.

The second example: Monica wants to find a new job, but she is only offered a job as a waitress for which she has to wear a costume, sing and dance. She is complaining about that, and she says: "I was a chef at the Café Des Artistes". The translator did not understand the name of the restaurant –which, by the way, is a real restaurant- and subtitled that sentence as "Yo trabajaba en el Café de Ortiz"!!! Even if you are not supposed to know French, you must have your ears trained to recognize the difference between French and Spanish!

This brings us to an important technique when you have a certain problem with understanding. AV translators, like interpreters, use "anticipation". In this case, if Monica was complaining because she used to be a chef, you must think of the possibility of her being a chef at a French restaurant.

The translator fails to see the need to adapt
or generalize a source culture reference

According to Hatim and Mason (1), "what is inferable or situationally evoked for a source text reader may not be so for a target text reader". This example is not taken from a movie, but considering last year I translated a film called Inconceivable about a couple who couldn't have kids, where almost every fertility term and technique appeared, it certainly could:

"In Tom's case, his sperm count was only 10 million, making him statistically infertile. What's more, an analysis of his microscopic swimmers showed a high percentage of malformations. His Neiman-Marcus body, it seemed, was pumping out Kmart-quality sperm."

This last sentence means nothing to someone who doesn't know the difference between Neiman Marcus (a nice department store) and K-mart (a supermarket). If the translator does not adapt it, the meaning is completely lost.

However, if you have ever watched the dubbed version of The Nanny on Telefé, you may have noticed that many proper names were replaced by an umbrella term, which makes understanding easier for those who do not know what those proper names refer to. For instance, Fran tells Mr. Sheffield that the silliest thing she has done is "Windexing your Monet". The reference to Windex would not be clear, so using an umbrella term is a good solution.

The translator's discourse analysis is not good

In one of the episodes from The Nanny, Fran is in court, and a very old uncle of hers is supposed to be her lawyer. But he is late, and when he finally arrives, this is (more or less) the dialogue:

UNCLE —I object!
JUDGE —To what?
UNCLE —To the automatic doors in the men's room.
JUDGE —That's the elevator.
UNCLE —Oops. Use the stairs.

The subtitler chose to translate "Use the stairs" as "Forget my objection", which ruins the punch line and shows that he or she was not paying attention to discourse analysis.

Some time ago I saw a movie called "Playing by Heart". The movie starts as a collection of scenes that are apparently not connected. As in a puzzle, you must put the pieces together. But you can't do it as fast as you should because the translator missed some of the clues the movie gives you. For instance, one of the characters says "Don't be an anger-ball". "Anger-ball" is not a word you hear everyday. In fact, another character tells her: "Who says that?" When I heard another character use the same expression, I started to put some pieces together. But to my surprise, the translator used a different translation each time a character said "anger-ball", so the Spanish-speaking audience missed that clue.

9. The translator has not carried out any research before working on the script

I saw the end of a movie about Sonny Bono and Cher. The translator misread the last part where it said that Sonny had died in a **ski** accident, and translated it as a **plane crash** (probably because he/she read "sky" instead of "ski"). Now if the translator had taken some time to read about Sonny and Cher **before** translating the movie, he/she would have known that it was a ski accident, and then the mistake could have been prevented. **Note: You don't have to read only serious articles. I actually found an Internet site full of dead celebrities jokes. An example from the page dedicated to Sonny Bono:** *"If Cher had been skiing and hit a tree, she would've probably lived... It's an even fight, wood vs. plastic".*

Different translators are assigned different episodes of the same show

Although this problem does not seem to be translator-related, it is. If you find that you are translating only some episodes of a show, it is your duty to know how they were or are being translated, so that proper names, certain terms and idiolects are the same. When translators do not pay attention to this, you have problems

like having different ways of writing the same name (in The Nanny, for instance, CC Babcock is called either "CC" or "CeeCee" or "Sissi"!!!) or changing the translation of a nickname (in The X Files, Mulder's nickname, "Spooky", is translated both as "El fantasma" (!) and "Fantasmal").

On the other hand, in *Little House on the Prairie*, Laura Ingalls is called "half pint" by his father. If I'm not mistaken, the translation was always the same: "pequeña", which means that either all the episodes were translated by the same person or that the different translators really worked as a team.

The ideal AV translator would be a fan of the series, somebody who has seen every single episode. At the beginning of this paper, I said that the scene in which Mulder and Scully hugged was reminiscent of one in the pilot, and I also said that it had taken them 7 seasons to get to that point in their relationship. I cannot think of a better example to show how much you have to know about the series to be able to translate it right!

Now most of these cases resulted in the audience being puzzled, not understanding, feeling cheated, laughing instead of crying, or thinking that the translator did a bad job, which ultimately creates an image unfair to all the translators who usually do a good job.

"Professional standards in language transfer are central to the commercial success of a television program or film shown in a different country. Likewise, a badly-subtitled or dubbed work not only loses money for the producer but can also discourage audiences from watching productions in another language." (2) Thus, I think that AV translators should:

• Check every proper name reference ("Dove" can refer to soap or ice-cream; "Century 21" is a department store in Manhattan **and** a real estate agency).

•Always remember that scripts must have a "dialogue-y" quality.

• Read books, magazines and Internet articles, movie reviews and newspapers, but paying attention to **everything**. Remember ads and commercials are as important as articles.

• Use a slang dictionary and slang glossaries on the Internet, according to the origin of the source text. Pay attention to idioms, inferences and irony.

• Watch TV, but learn from the experience. Try to remember proper names, facts, and new expressions. Watch CNN and documentaries, but also watch dramas and movies, and specially sitcoms, where you can learn both what people in the source culture are saying *right now* and the terms they used some years ago. Also, watch programs from other Latin American countries to learn *their* Spanish.

• Be on the alert for foreign words and expressions. If you translate from English, expect to find French (even in the title song from *The Nanny* there is a French expression, *joie de vivre*), German, Latin and Spanish mainly, and some oddities like Pig Latin. Remember many technical or scientific terms are in other languages. (Imagine trying to understand the words "zona pellucida" in an English context without reading about the subject first!)

• Use the time you have efficiently. Try not to work until the wee hours, because then you will be tired and probably make mistakes.

• Never use acronyms in the translation if they are not well known in the target culture. For example, Spanish speakers would never realize that "CETK" means *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. If there is no time or space on the screen to include all the words, think of a way of adapting, replacing or solving the problem in some other way.

• Say what you have just translated in a loud voice. Does it really sound like something a person would say (as opposed to write)?

• Always take some time to do some research beforehand and to make a fine discourse analysis. If you are translating an episode from a saga or a series, DO watch some other episodes first, or at least visit some Internet sites where you can find information on the characters or even special glossaries for the series (particularly if it is a science fiction movie or series, like Star Trek).

• Even if you have little time to finish your translation, **use your head and think**. Translation should NOT become a mechanical task, because when it does, common sense mistakes occur.

• And last but not least, **enjoy your work!** It's so much fun to be an AV translator, but it is even better to watch the movie or episode you have subtitled or dubbed and find out the audience is responding as you hoped they would!

References

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