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BA English Honours | Semester III | Calicut University

Writing for the Screen: Theory and Praxis

Course Code: ENG3MN202 • Module 2 Notes

Module II: Subtitling

1. Introduction to Audiovisual Translation (AVT) & Subtitling as Translation

Audiovisual Translation (AVT) represents one of the fastest-growing disciplines in modern linguistics, media studies, and translation science. Unlike traditional literary translation, which operates within a monomodal printed medium, AVT deals with multimodal communication texts where acoustic and visual semiotic channels operate simultaneously. The audiovisual text comprises four concurrent informational channels: the visual verbal channel (signs, letters, street names, written text on screen), the visual non-verbal channel (facial expressions, bodily gestures, mise-en-scène, camera movement), the acoustic verbal channel (spoken dialogue, songs, voiceover narration), and the acoustic non-verbal channel (sound effects, musical scores, ambient noise).

Subtitling is an audiovisual translation practice that displays synchronized, written textual fragments—usually placed at the bottom of the cinematic frame—translating the original spoken dialogue, narrative voiceovers, and pertinent textual elements into written target language. It is defined by Henrik Gottlieb as a *diasemiotic* (intermodal) translation mode because it shifts verbal acoustic speech into visual graphic text, coexisting alongside the pristine original soundtrack.

2. Loss and Gain in Subtitling: Spatio-Temporal Constraints

The defining characteristic of subtitling is that it operates under severe technical, spatial, and temporal boundaries:

- **Spatial Constraints:** Subtitles must not obscure vital visual information or actor expressions. Industry standards enforce a maximum of **two lines** of text per subtitle unit. Each line is constrained to between **35 and 40 characters** (including spaces and punctuation) for Latin-based alphabets (and 14–16 characters for Asian ideographic scripts). Text is centered or left-aligned at the bottom of the screen.
- **Temporal Constraints & Reading Speed:** Spoken verbal speech proceeds at significantly higher speed than comfortable reading rates. An average speaker utters 150 to 180 words per minute, whereas viewers read screen text at approximately 140 to 160 words per minute. Subtitling adheres to the classical **"Six-Second Rule"** (or modern 12–17 characters per second / CPS parameter), dictating that a full two-line subtitle containing 70 characters must remain visible on screen for approximately six seconds to ensure effortless viewer reading without missing visual action.
- **Loss and Omission:** To fit these rigorous metrics, subtitlers must condense spoken dialogue by 20% to 40%. Spoken elements sacrificed include phatic communion (small talk, verbal fillers like "you know", "well", "um"), repetitions, rhetorical redundancies, and minor dialectal tags. Nuanced linguistic connotations and poetic rhymes may be lost in condensation.
- **Gain in Accessibility and Global Reach:** Subtitling democratizes global cinema, enabling foreign language films to achieve international distribution while preserving original actor vocal performances, voice textures, intonation, and authentic cultural ambiance.

3. Types and Core Principles of Subtitling

Subtitling is categorized according to linguistic parameters and technical delivery methods:

- **Linguistic Classification:**

    - *Intralingual Subtitling (Same-Language):* Subtitling within the same language as the spoken soundtrack. Primarily used for Subtitles for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (SDH), language learners, and karaoke. SDH incorporates non-speech acoustic information (e.g., `[somber piano music]`, `[distant gunshots]`, `[whispering nervously]`) and speaker identification cues.
    - *Interlingual Subtitling (Cross-Language):* Translation from source language spoken dialogue into a target language written text.
    - *Bilingual Subtitling:* Simultaneous presentation of two target languages in two distinct lines (common in multilingual nations such as Belgium, Switzerland, Finland, and Singapore).
- **Technical Classification:**
    - *Open Subtitles:* Hardcoded (burned) permanently onto the video track; cannot be toggled off by the viewer.
    - *Closed Subtitles:* Stored as separate digital metadata tracks (e.g., `.srt`, `.vtt`, teletext) that viewers can turn on, off, or customize in terms of font and language on digital players and streaming platforms.
- **Fundamental Principles of Subtitling:**
    - *Spotting / Cueing:* Synchronizing subtitle appearance (in-times) and disappearance (out-times) with exact speech onsets and pauses. Subtitles must not linger across major camera cuts because visual cuts induce an involuntary eye-jump, prompting viewers to re-read the same subtitle line.
    - *Line Segmentation:* Dividing text across lines according to syntactic and semantic units (noun phrases, verb phrases, prepositional clauses) rather than arbitrary typographical hyphenation, maximizing reading ease.
    - *Legibility:* Using clear sans-serif typography (Arial, Roboto, Helvetica, Tiresias) with high contrast, often supported by semi-transparent black backing boxes or drop shadows.

4. Eva Espasa: "Myths About Documentary Translation"

In her influential scholarly work *Myths About Documentary Translation*, Eva Espasa deconstructs widespread theoretical and industrial misconceptions surrounding the translation and subtitling of documentary cinema:

- **Myth 1: Documentaries are purely objective and informative:** Espasa refutes the simplistic notion that documentaries are monolithic informational tracts. Modern documentaries encompass poetic, performative, expository, observational, and reflexive modes. They deploy stylized rhetoric, emotional testimony, ideological propaganda, and artistic ambiguity that require literary translation sensitivity rather than mechanical technical data transfer.
- **Myth 2: Documentary translation is strictly technical and neutral:** Translators are not invisible terminological conduits. Documentaries feature polyvocal narratives—ranging from scientific academic lectures to spontaneous working-class street slang. The translator must preserve sociolects, regional idioms, and ideological voices without flattening them into sanitized academic prose.
- **Myth 3: Documentaries rely exclusively on voiceover rather than subtitling:** While revoicing (voiceover) is prevalent in broadcast television, global film festivals and streaming platforms heavily utilize subtitling to honor authentic indigenous voices, preserve witness testimonies, and maintain acoustic credibility.

5. Henrik Gottlieb: "Subtitles and International Anglification"

Danish translation theorist Henrik Gottlieb examines the cultural and linguistic ramifications of subtitling in his critical essay *Subtitles and International Anglification* (2004):

- **Polysemiotic Nature of Screen Media:** Gottlieb formalizes the four-channel semiotic model of cinema, demonstrating that subtitling operates as an additive, vulnerable translation form because spectators who understand elementary source language vocabulary can directly compare spoken audio with printed subtitles, scrutinizing the translator's decisions.
- **Hegemony of Anglo-American Media:** Gottlieb analyzes how subtitling accelerates the global dominance of the English language. In non-anglophone countries (particularly Scandinavia and Western Europe) where subtitling is favored over dubbing, populations consume massive volumes of American and British media. This leads to linguistic borrowing, syntactic calques, idiomatic anglicisms, and cultural homogenization, altering local speech patterns.
- **Gottlieb's Typology of Subtitling Strategies:**
  1. *Expansion:* Providing explicit contextual explanation (rare due to space limits).
  2. *Paraphrase:* Altering phraseology to convey equivalent meaning concisely.
  3. *Transfer:* Direct, faithful rendering of source dialogue.
  4. *Imitation:* Retaining proper nouns and untranslated foreign terminology.
  5. *Condensation:* Trimming rhetorical fat while preserving semantic core (most common).
  6. *Decimation:* Severe syntactic reduction in rapid-fire dialogue exchanges.
  7. *Deletion:* Total omission of non-essential interjections and repetitions.
  8. *Resignation:* Inability to convey untranslatable wordplay or culture-specific puns.

6. Illustrative Subtitle Study: Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Amélie* (2001)

Jean-Pierre Jeunet's whimsical romantic comedy *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain* (2001) serves as a classic benchmark for studying the nuances, challenges, and creative solutions of audiovisual translation and subtitling:

- **Magical Realism and Idiosyncratic French Culture:** The film presents a stylized, nostalgic Montmartre characterized by eccentric characters, playful visual metaphors, and lyrical voiceover narration by André Dussollier. Subtitlers faced the complex task of translating localized Parisian geography, vintage cultural realia, and poetic French idioms into concise English subtitles without undermining the film's fairy-tale innocence.
- **Wordplay and Linguistic Humor:** Amélie is replete with playful linguistic inventions, puns, and rapid observational humor (such as the narrator cataloging the mundane likes and dislikes of characters). Subtitlers employed ingenious functional equivalence—condensing verbose French expressions into sharp, witty English phrasing that preserved comic timing and rhythmic balance.
- **Multimodal Harmony:** The vibrant cinematography by Bruno Delbonnel and the accordion-infused soundtrack by Yann Tiersen create an intoxicating audiovisual rhythm. The English subtitles respect visual pacing, ensuring that titles do not linger during Jeunet's signature rapid-fire visual gags, exemplifying how masterclass subtitling seamlessly supports visual storytelling.

Advanced Cinematic Theory, Screenplay Architecture & Intermedial Praxis (Extension Phase 1)

In contemporary screen studies and screenwriting scholarship, analyzing Module 2 demands a rigorous integration of dramaturgical theory, audiovisual semiotics, and production praxeology. Cinema operates as a multi-layered linguistic and visual system where structural discipline, visual grammar, acoustic design, and narrative transformation converge. Examining cinematic texts requires synthesizing classical Hollywood

dramaturgical paradigms with European auteur theory, audiovisual translation science, and postcolonial adaptation hermeneutics.

1. Theoretical Formulations & Dramaturgical Debates

Critical scholarship in screenwriting and film theory addresses several fundamental structural tensions:

- **Three-Act Orthodoxy versus Sequence Approach:** While Syd Field's three-act structure remains the commercial benchmark, Paul Joseph Gulino's sequence method posits that a feature screenplay is composed of eight 10-to-15 minute mini-narratives, each with its own internal tension and resolution, mitigating the dreaded "second-act sag."
- **Visual Supremacy versus Audiovisual Polysemiosis:** Classical cinema theorists like Béla Balázs argued for the absolute primacy of the visual image and the expressive close-up. Conversely, contemporary scholars like Michel Chion emphasize *audiovision*—the inextricable trans-sensory bond wherein sound re-interprets and alters the psychological perception of visual images.
- **Fidelity Criticism versus Intertextual Dialogism:** Early adaptation studies simplistically judged screen translations by their obedient fidelity to literary sources. Contemporary theorists, notably Linda Hutcheon and Brian McFarlane, recognize that adaptation is an autonomous intertextual dialogue where cinematic works creatively reinterpret, critique, and emancipate narratives within new cultural horizons.

2. Comparative Analytical Matrix: Formats, Methodologies & Screen Praxes

A structured comparative assessment delineates key dimensions across cinematic practices in Module 2:

Analytical Dimension	Screenwriting & Dramaturgy	Audiovisual Translation & Subtitling	Adaptation & Film Reviewing
Primary Medium	Typographic screenplay format (Courier 12pt, sluglines, action, dialogue).	Diasemiotic text anchored to lower screen (37–40 chars/line, 2 lines max).	Intermedial audio-visual spectacle and critical analytical prose.
Core Operational Rule	1 formatted page = 1 minute of screen time; "Show, don't tell" active voice.	Six-second rule / 12–17 characters per second reading velocity.	Creative repetition without replication; objective formal critique over personal bias.
Creative Constraints	Externalizing internal monologue; visual action verbs; pacing beats.	20%–40% textual condensation; shot cut synchronization; legibility.	Medium specificity; transcultural localization; narrative compression.
Aesthetic Objective	Compelling character arcs, emotional catharsis, kinetic visual momentum.	Unobtrusive viewer comprehension, preserving actor intonation and cultural realia.	Thematic interrogation, ideological subversion, and formal artistic evaluation.

3. Glossary of Screenwriting, AVT & Cinematic Semiotics

Cinematic Term	Operational Domain	Formal Definition & Practical Application
Slugline (Scene Heading)	Screenplay Formatting	Standardized capitalized header specifying interior/exterior, exact location, and time of day (e.g., INT. CELL BLOCK - NIGHT).

Cinematic Term	Operational Domain	Formal Definition & Practical Application
Inciting Incident	Dramatic Structure	The catalytic event occurring within the first 10–15 pages that disrupts ordinary life and sets the central dramatic conflict into motion.
SDH Subtitles	Audiovisual Translation	Subtitles for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing: intralingual subtitles incorporating non-speech acoustic cues [e.g., eerie violin crescendo].
Mise-en-Scène	Cinematic Formalism	Everything appearing before the camera lens: set design, lighting, costumes, props, actor blocking, and color grading.
Diegetic Sound	Sound Design	Sound whose source exists within the fictional world of the film, audible to the characters on screen (dialogue, ambient noise).
Chutzpah Transposition	Postcolonial Adaptation	The subversive localization of universal existential themes into specific regional political conflicts (e.g., Bhardwaj's Kashmir Hamlet).

4. Professional Screen Production Workflow & Quality Review Protocol

Professional cinematic execution across Module 2 adheres to a structured four-phase workflow:

- **Phase 1: Logline & Step Outline Development:** Distilling core dramatic premise into a single high-concept logline; developing 40-step beat outlines to map out major character arcs and turning points.
- **Phase 2: Screenplay Drafting & Formatting:** Utilizing professional software (Final Draft, WriterDuet) to compose scene headings, action descriptions, and subtext-rich dialogue adhering to Courier 12pt industry standards.
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