

# The use of explicit translation in dubbing for children. Two case studies<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

The aim of the present paper is to address the issue of explicitation in audiovisual translation. In particular, it focuses on script translations for the dubbing of cartoons, which together with movies and film series belong to the dramatic genre (Agost, 1999)<sup>2</sup>. Two case studies will be presented, namely the analysis of the English original versions and their Spanish dubbed (and re-dubbed) versions of *Dumbo* (1941) and *Bambi* (1943). As will be clearly shown in the following sections, the translator of the original script plays a fundamental role in processing the global textual meaning, since no translation decision goes without effect. Therefore, the use of explicit translation has significant implications that translators should carefully consider at all times. Since the analysis is based on real examples, the present paper may also be useful for teachers looking for relevant material to present and discuss explicit translation in a classroom set-

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1 This work is the result of a joint effort: Luis A. Iglesias wrote sections 1, 2 and 3 and Mercedes Ariza sections 4, 5 and 6.

2 According to Agost (1999: 66), in cartoon dubbing there seem to be fewer obstacles to phonetic synchronicity, as the translator is faced with very little problems concerning lip-synchronisation compared to other dramatic genres. However, as rightly pointed out by Reyes Lozano (2007), this particular type of audiovisual texts, i.e. cartoons, are prepared with increasing care by cartoonists, who are more aware of how to draw “los movimientos de sus dibujos, especialmente los labiales, tomando como modelo a actores reales, lo que proporciona el alto grado de credibilidad de algunos personajes animados” (Reyes Lozano; 2007: 13), [i.e. the movements of their characters, especially lip movements, by taking as model real life actors, thus delivering a high degree of credibility in some cartoon characters – our translation] therefore, more problems than expected may arise.

ting. The conclusions contain a summary of the key ideas raised in the analysis and a series of questions that invite further discussion.

## 2. Approaching explicit translation

Information can be conveyed clearly and overtly, or vaguely and subtly. In the Collins Cobuild English Dictionary (2003: 498) the definition of the term *explicit* is attributed to something that is “expressed or shown clearly and openly, without any attempt to hide anything”, in other words, something that is stated and not insinuated or taken for granted. The opposite being, of course, that which is *implicit* or unspecified, perhaps because it can be guessed or deduced, or simply because it goes without saying.

Within the field of translation, the level of explicitness in a text – whether regarding written and elaborated speech or spoken and spontaneous utterances – generally refers to the degree of directness and clarity with which information is conveyed. According to Mayoral (1994), the use of explicitation or additional information is an appropriate way to translate cultural references, whenever the translator has a certain audience in mind and considers that it should be well informed about such cultural references.

However, translators should always be mindful of the way in which information is provided in the source texts (in this particular instance, a script that needs to be translated for dubbing). Particularly, they need to distinguish between the following:

- what the original script states clearly and deliberately;
- what the script communicates implicitly or allows one to deduce;
- what the script neither states explicitly nor communicates implicitly (perhaps because it is unnecessary, or simply because it does not wish to do so).

Comparing originals with their translations allows researchers to better understand the translation process and the procedures involved, and even to pinpoint traits common to many translations, which set them apart from their originals and identify them as the derivative works that they intrinsically are. The greater or lesser degree of explicitness of a translation, as compared to that of its original, happens to be one such trait.

Among others, Baker (1993: 243) speaks of “features which seem (intuitively) to be linked to the nature of the translation process itself rather than to the confrontation of specific linguistic systems”, and she notes a marked rise in the level of explicitness compared to specific source texts and to original texts in general”. Naturally, one would expect this tendency towards a higher

degree of explicitness to result in translations which build extensive background information – which the source text does not provide – into the target text.

Going back to script translation, when translators decide to translate explicitly, they generally wish to provide the target audience with additional information and help them fully understand the target message more easily. This way translators hope that the target audience does not misinterpret or miss important content, which would be easily grasped by the source language audience instead, as a result of a combination of words (coming from a written script, but ultimately heard as part of the film’s soundtrack) and images (projected on the screen)<sup>3</sup>. By using explicitation, translators wish to ensure that all of the information in the original film – whether verbal or visual – reaches its target audience and produces the effect that both the scriptwriter and the film director originally intended<sup>4</sup>. To this end, audiovisual translators are particularly interested in considering the impact on meaning achieved by working on the verbal level, since this is the only one they can adjust in most cases (Chaume, 2004a: 163).

However well-intended explicit translation may seem, oftentimes it reveals a protective and paternalistic attitude on the part of the translator who, hoping to spare the target audience any potential confusion and misunderstanding, prepares a more palatable version of the film in which the audience is spoon-fed everything that the original script left unsaid or merely hinted at. Particularly, this paternalistic attitude is a sign of a simplifying and domesticating effort, which seems to be a recurrent feature of translators in the field of audiovisual products for children (Lorenzo y Pereira, 1999; 2001; Zabalbeascoa, 2000)<sup>5</sup>. However, translating for children should not imply using “sweetened language” just because a very young audience would not be able to understand otherwise (Pascua, 2000: 96), or having to communicate in an express manner that which in the original can only be “read between the lines”.

3 This combination of words and images is at the core of every audiovisual text (Chaume, 2004a: 26).

4 Audiovisual translation is the result of teamwork, in which various participants give their contribution (Mayoral, 2001). Consequently, the final quality of a translation mirrors a shared responsibility amongst all the members of the translation team. This can be a critical factor, in that in many occasions the translator’s work may undergo major changes due to the adaptor or the director’s interventions, though these professional figures may have little knowledge (or no knowledge at all) of the source language (Agost, 1999; Mayoral, 2001).

5 Excessive simplification and domestication of cultural references is clear, for example, in the translation of proper names and nouns that are present in the source text: systematic translation and morphological and phonetic adaptation are the rule (Pereira y Lorenzo, 2000: 125; Pereira y Lorenzo, 2005: 246).

In the following section, some examples taken from *Dumbo* (1941) and its Spanish translated versions will be illustrated in order to highlight the presence of two main types of explicit translation, thus showing how some information items contained in the source script were manipulated in the target text.

### 3. Case study #1: From *Jumbo* to *Dumbo*

Few outside the die-hard fans of everything Disney in Spanish know that *Dumbo* (1941) was dubbed twice in Spanish. First in Argentina in 1942, several months after its US release, by film and theatre director Luis César Amadori (hereafter AM), and later in Mexico, in 1964, by lyricist and dubbing director Edmundo Santos (hereafter ES)<sup>6</sup>.

The following fragment belongs to the scene in which the baby elephant receives its name:

Elephants: Oh!  
Elephant 1: Is it possible?  
Elephant 2: Isn't there some mistake?  
Elephant 3: Just look at those, those E-A-R-S.  
Elephant 4: Those what? Oh, ears! These! Aren't they funny?  
[With a slap of her trunk Mrs. Dumbo pushes Elephant 4 away from her baby.] Oh!  
Elephants: Oh, my goodness. What a temper!  
Elephant 4: Oh, what did I do? Well, tell me. Did I say anything?  
Elephant 1: Perfectly harmless remark.  
Elephant 4: I just said that they're funny, and they are funny.  
Elephant 3: They certainly are.  
Elephant 2: After all, who cares... about her precious little Jumbo?  
Elephant 3: Jumbo? You mean Dumbo  
Elephants: Dumbo! Dumbo, I say. That's good.  
Dumbo! That's good. Dumbo! Hahaha.

(*Dumbo*, US, 1941)

The name *Dumbo* holds no secrets to any English speaker: having as its root the adjective *dumb*, its meaning becomes self-evident. Therefore, the original script

6 According to Iglesias (2006: 15; 2009: 503), Edmundo Santos impressed a particular and unique character to all films in which he was involved, so much so that his Spanish dubbed versions of films pertaining to the golden age of Disney's Studios (1937-1977) have become a benchmark in assessing strengths and weaknesses of all subsequent dubbed and re-dubbed versions. Further information about the history of Disney's dubbed films can be found in the following web portal: <http://www.doblajedisney.com>.

does not need to explain the reasoning and intention that leads one of the female elephants to twist *Jumbo*, for such is the little elephant's true name, into *Dumbo*. While *Jumbo*'s mother reacts indignantly to the mockery, the other elephants celebrate it.

If the two Spanish target versions are considered, both dubs handled it differently. Both used explicit translation, but whereas in the first dub the original information was replaced with new content, the target audience of the second dub received an expanded, amplified version. Did both dubs manage to relay everything that the source script conveyed? One did, the other did not. Did the Spanish translation require that the script be somehow altered or manipulated? Indeed, in both instances.

Let us now see how the name *Dumbo* entered the Spanish-speaking world via two different dubs produced over a twenty-two-year span. For the sake of brevity, the following transcriptions of the translations by AM and ES begin at the exact point where the nickname *Dumbo* is first introduced.

#### 3. 1. Explicit translation by substitution in the AM dub

Elefanta 2: Después de todo, ¿a quién le importa su precioso Dumbo?  
Elefanta 3: ¿Dumbo? ¡Ja, quiere decir tonto!  
Elefanta mayor: ¡Dumbo! Ja, ja, ja. Muy bueno. ¡Dumbo!

(*Dumbo*, 1942, Spanish version)

Note that this translation omits a crucial piece of information, i.e. the youngling's name is not *Dumbo* but *Jumbo*. AM translates as if *Dumbo* were originally the name of the elephant, thus making no reference to the real name of the little elephant. This way, the phonetic pun between *jumbo* and *dumbo* is not maintained, possibly throwing the Spanish audience, who may find it puzzling or consider it rather unusual that a mother opts for such an offensive name for her baby. Such as it is, the translation prevents the Spanish-speaking audience from knowing that *Dumbo* actually derives from *Jumbo* with the sole intent of mocking the baby and its mother. The translation above replaces the name *Jumbo* with a gloss, i.e. an explicit translation which explains the meaning of the nickname: ¿Dumbo? ¡Ja, quiere decir tonto! (*Dumbo? That means stupid!*). Were it not for this, the Spanish-speaking audience would have never understood that *Dumbo* means *dumb*. Note how this additional piece of information – necessary in order to understand the scene – is introduced at the cost of losing the original play on words (*Jumbo/Dumbo*).

### 3.2. Explicit translation by amplification in the ES dub

Let us now see how this translation problem was tackled more than twenty years later.

Elefanta 2: Después de todo, a nosotras ni nos importa su precioso Jumbo.

Elefanta 3: ¿Jumbo? ¡Querrás decir Dumbo!

Elefanta mayor: ¡Dumbo! [Laughter]

Elefanta 2: [Off] Dumbo quiere decir tonto, ¿verdad?

Elefanta 4: [Off] ¡Un perfecto Dumbo! ¡Un perfecto tonto!

(*Dumbo*, 1964, Spanish version)

In this case, the translated script conveys as much information as the English original. Nothing is left out and both names – Jumbo and Dumbo – are included so that their phonetic similarity can be noted.

At this stage, as the audience understands that Dumbo is not the elephant's real name, the translator deemed it necessary to explain why the other elephants start laughing and to inform the Spanish spectators about the meaning of dumbo, thus making it clear why this name was chosen and not others. Obviously, as already mentioned (§ 3), the original script did not include such an explanation simply because it did not need to.

Thankfully for the translator, just when it becomes necessary to provide additional information by means of a gloss, both the image and original sound track come to the rescue. The voices of the elephants laughing and commenting on the malevolent quip are heard in the background, while the camera focuses on the mother and her baby. Every script translator probably knows what strategies and techniques can be used to overcome phonetic, kinetic and sync limitations that are so common in any audiovisual text (Heiss, Bollettieri Bosinelli, 1996; Agost, 1999; Chaume, 2004a, 2004b). In this particular case, the translator added information that was considered necessary by means of off-screen voices: the least intrusive and most effective way to insert background information in a translated script.

Let us review how Edmundo Santos managed to make the original pun explicit by adding two extra cues, thus taking advantage of the overlapping sounds (e.g. voices, noises, laughter) and of the little sync-related limitations in this scene.

Elefanta 2: [Off] Dumbo quiere decir tonto, ¿verdad?

Elefanta 4: [Off] ¡Un perfecto Dumbo! ¡Un perfecto tonto!(Dumbo means fool, doesn't it? / A Dumbo, indeed! Then a fool!)

(*Dumbo*, 1964, Spanish version)

In this way, the resulting Spanish translation is as complete, informative and effective as the English source text, thus fulfilling the requirement of any translation, as García-Yebra (1989: 43) puts it: “[translating means] decir todo lo que dice el original, no decir nada que el original no diga, y decirlo todo con la corrección y naturalidad que permita la lengua a la que se traduce” (saying everything of what is said in the original, saying nothing of what is not said in the original, and saying it all in the correct and natural form that is allowed by language into which one is translating).

### 4. Potential side effects of explicit translation

At the heart of every translated text lies a complex and multilevel network of interconnected relationships. Any translation decision made at any point in the text, however insignificant it may seem, affects the whole. Aware of this fact, the mindful translator will carefully consider the overall impact of every one of the countless decisions that will have to be made at every step of the way.

Resorting to explicit translation as the best translation procedure available in a particular instance is just one example of the countless decisions that, consciously or unconsciously, a translator has to make when at work.

As was pointed out earlier, explicit translation is essentially a strategy which results in a more informative text. Therefore, this practice can be said to help the overall translation process in two ways:

- by collaborating with the intention of the original text, since it helps the latter to overcome the linguistic barrier and to fulfil its pragmatic and communicative role, according to the principles that are supposed to govern speech (Grice, 1975; 1989);
- by collaborating with the target audience, since it provides only as much background information as necessary to bridge – as much as possible – the gap between what the source text intends to convey (its intended meaning) and what is actually understood by the receiver.

By definition, saying more and not less is what characterizes explicit translation. The difficulty lies in striking the right balance, so that the increased *informativity* of the translation does not betray the original intention of the text. To illustrate this point, let us remember that the secret behind the effect of suspense, as produced by a good thriller, lies not in giving the reader all of the clues to the mystery, but only as many (or as few) as needed to understand what is taking place and, maybe, to foresee what is about to happen. providing them too soon

might allow the reader to anticipate the outcome and, therefore, ruin the suspense.

Can a translated script spoil the unexpected turns of a well laid-out plot by telling too much, too soon? Indeed, an explicit translation may ruin the intended effect of its source text by being too informative. Should that be the case the target audience, unable to compare the dubbed version with its original, would be none the wiser as to the fact that the effectiveness of the source script has been diminished.

Going back to the difficult balance between increased *informativity* and the original intention of the source text, the following excerpt from *Bambi* (1943) illustrates how an explicit translation can completely mar the effect of an entire sequence and, in so doing, affect the whole film.

## 5. Case study #2. The death of Bambi's mother. Neutralizing effectiveness by means of explicit translation

In the prelude to this memorable sequence, Bambi and his mother have run away from gunfire. The doe has lagged behind but the fawn has succeeded in finding shelter. Feeling the threat over, Bambi comes out and looks for his mother. Outside a snowstorm has broken. Bambi wanders aimlessly in the blizzard, blinded and disoriented:

Bambi: We made it. We made it, mother. We... Mother? Mother! Mother, where are you? Mother? Mother? Mother? Mother? Mother?

[*Bambi gasps at the sight of an imposing silhouette before him. The Great Prince of the forest has found him.*]

Great Prince: Your mother can't be with you any more. Come, my son.

*Bambi* (1943)

In the original English version, ominous silence dominates the entire sequence. A helpless Bambi cries out for his mother, his little voice suffocated by the blizzard. At this point the audience is already several steps ahead and understands that the worst has happened: the hunters have shot down Bambi's mother. This being the most logical, natural conclusion, it is readily understood without the film having to state it visually or verbally. Walt Disney and his team of scriptwriters must have known that the strongest possible effect is always achieved by directly stimulating the imagination of the spectators so that they themselves interpret what the film leaves unsaid.

Bambi becomes paralyzed at the sudden appearance of the Great Prince. Total silence fills the screen for 15 interminable seconds<sup>7</sup>. Finally, the great stag asks Bambi to go with him (*Come, my son*), letting Bambi understand with these words who is his real father. Thus ends the account of Bambi's childhood.

In the dubbed version directed by Edmundo Santos<sup>8</sup>, the pregnant silence is broken to make explicit what the original script neither needed nor wished to say:

Príncipe del Bosque: Tu madre no podrá venir ya más. Los hombres se la han llevado. Debes ser valiente y aprender a andar solito. Ven, hijo mío.

(Great Prince: Your mother can't be with you anymore. Those men have taken her away. You must be strong and walk on your own. Come, my son.)

(*Bambi*, 1964, Spanish version)

Santos takes advantage of the fact that the voice of the Great Prince is heard off screen to add information (see underlined words in the transcription above). However, the relevance of such additions is questionable and they may even be detrimental to the sequence for a number of reasons:

- they undermine the ominous overall sensation of the sequence,
- they mislead the audience, since they added “Los hombres se la han llevado” (those men have taken her away) could mean that Bambi's mother has been simply captured and not killed, a conclusion that the English script does in no way invite,
- they break the 15-second purposefully long silence; the addition of “debes ser valiente y aprender a andar solito” (you must be strong and walk on your own) might be due to a special kind of horror vacui – fear of emptiness – which drove Santos to fill it with new text.

By pointing these out, we do not mean to belittle the quality of the Spanish version of *Bambi*. Let us not lose sight of the big picture: *Bambi* has been and still is regarded as a classic by Spanish-speaking audiences all over the world, audiences who care little or not at all for analyses such as the one presented here.

The fact that the translated script deviates from the original to the extent that it does, is something that concerns only translation scholars. Indeed, target viewers are not likely to be aware of the above mentioned changes, unless they

7 Bambi has been recently re-released on a special two-disc DVD edition. One of the bonus documentaries included in the set describes how Walt Disney himself decided that the scene be shown without any background music or sound effects in order to heighten the dramatic intensity of the moment.

8 Few know that the only Spanish dub extant of *Bambi* is in fact what is called a “re-dub” directed by Edmundo Santos some 20 years after the film's original release. *Bambi's* first dub in Spanish, directed by Amadori in 1943, has been long lost.

watched analytically the English original version to spot differences. Furthermore, interested audiences considerably rely on dubbing, to the extent that they probably consider it part of their standard approach to foreign movies, just like a habit that is very difficult to modify (Chaume, 2004a: 53).

Going back to *Bambi*, audiences in Spain and Latin America, past and present, have cried the death of Bambi's mother as portrayed by Santos's dub. His version of the film has achieved classic status and it is doubtful that any future re-dubs will change that. Executives at Disney studios seem to be well aware of this, as they keep releasing this and the rest of the dubs by Santos in ever more attractive digital editions because of their unquestionable merits, despite their flaws and regardless of how quaint and dated they may sound.

## 6. Conclusions

Translators' decisions on how to transfer the source language meaning into the target language and culture always entail a number of consequences, regardless of the type of text and target audience involved. Just as there may be several possible solutions to one particular translation unit, so will the impact of each one vary in its nature. Therefore, a skilled translator is probably someone who is aware of this fact and weighs the consequences of every translation decision against the true meaning and intention of the source text. Against this background, in the present paper two case studies of audiovisual translation for dubbing are presented, namely Disney Studio's popular cartoons *Dumbo* (1941) and *Bambi* (1943). The analysis concerns both English source scripts and Spanish dubbed and re-dubbed target versions, with a special focus on occurrences of explicitation and information expansion in the target language scripts.

Explicit translation is by no means uncommon in real translation practice. In some cases, by virtue of its amplificatory nature it may entail substituting new content for information the source text never made express and only conveyed implicitly. On other occasions, no substitution takes place and background information is simply added to the translation. Even though explicit translation may help the target audience understand – a particular scene, for instance – sometimes it can also cause the dub to convey, or even actually *say*, more than the source script ever intended; or worse, something that it never intended to. Therefore, explicit translation may alter the effect of the passage it is used in, sometimes ruining it, other times maybe heightening it. In other words, there is no such thing as a neutral translation decision.

There are many issues connected with use of explicit translation that seem worth researching. Is there enough evidence behind the apparent tendency of Children's Literature translations (whether on or off-screen), to say more than their source texts? Can this be particularly true in the case of script translation for dubbing? Are there instances which specifically demand that explicit translation be favoured over other translation strategies? Does explicit translation indicate an overprotective attitude on the part of translators towards target audiences? Is explicit translation especially justified and necessary in translations aimed at children? It is clear that in order to answer any of these questions thoroughly would warrant years of further research. Hopefully, the analysis and the examples illustrated in this paper may serve as a starting point for other researchers sharing a similar interest in audiovisual translation and dubbing, for both research and teaching purposes.

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