

SUBTITLING AS A TOOL FOR COMMUNICATION IN YORUBA VIDEO-FILMS

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Abstract

One of the purposes of *subtitling* is to provide effective communication in a desired language. As subtitles are made to convey storyline and dialogue of a film to the (native and non-native) audience, it is crucial to understand that a filmmaker who truly desires to globalize the local and localize the global would engage the use of *subtitles* to achieve his vision. This paper seeks to pinpoint the essence of *subtitling* as a communication medium in Yoruba video-films. While developing a conceptual understanding of ‘language’, cultural elements that aid effective communication is also analyzed as well as identifying the distinguishing feature between the dual concepts of translation and transliteration.

Keywords: Communication, Language, Subtitling, Yoruba, Video-films

Introduction

Language, as we know it, is a system of communication which may be in form of written or spoken words. It can also be referred to as the medium of expression of feelings or ideas. It is a communication tool that makes us human. Language participates inextricably in the relationship between the mind and the world. Coleridge explains language as the “principal vehicle for the interaction of knowing, mind and shared concrete reality”. (Coleridge qtd. in Nath 12)

According to Reda, Ferdinand De Saussure conceptualized language as a system of signs. The linguistic sign is a tool for making meaning (or encoding concepts) that unites a sound-image and a concept. For example, the sound image (kæt) forms an integral part of the concept ‘cat’ (a mental representation of an animal of certain characteristics).

The sound image is referred to as the ‘signifier’ and the concept as the ‘signified’. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is conventional rather than intrinsic. In other words, it is arbitrary, based on social conventions. Nonetheless, being arbitrary, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is dynamic and can change or develop over time (91).

Based on the notion of arbitrariness, Charles Winck defines language as “a system of arbitrary vocal symbols, used to express communicable thoughts and feelings and enabling the members of a social group or speech community to interact and cooperate”.

Communication as a function of language is emphasized by Finegan when he states that ‘language is often viewed as a vehicle of thought, a system of expression that mediates the transfer of thought from one person to another’ (6). He adds that, ‘language is an arbitrary vocal system used by human beings to communicate with one another’ (22).

Finegan’s concept of language as a functional tool for communication is corroborated by Atai who perceives language as a social device: “language is a social fact. It is born of and saturated by social experience. It is active social experience. It is human activity and, very important indeed, speaks of and to human social activity” (32). Quoted by Olaluwoye, Babatunde sums up the relevance of language in communication:

In a nutshell, communication, using the written and spoken forms of language, functions in the society to convey meaning which leads to the sharing of ideas, facts and data. This in turn translates into the following easily identifiable functions in the social system: information dissemination, mass mobilization, education, cultural promotion, entertainment and communal integration (qtd. in Olaluwoye 123)

The informative function of language is utilized by film subtitlers, which implies the ability of providing a medium of communication to the audience. The semantic, semiotic and syntactic compositions of language facilitate the conveyance of information to viewers of video-films. One of the merits of language is the removal of

culture-barriers. Therefore, the employment of subtitles in film enjoys the synonymy of benefits.

The Purpose of Subtitles in Nollywood Films

It is the ultimate vision of every film director to ensure his film is accepted by the audience, either local or global. However, a handful of directors in Nollywood erroneously believe that imitating the stories, themes, symbols and subject-matters of the western world would give them a pride of place at the global market. Simply put, some Nollywood directors introduce violence to their films in the quest to imitate their Hollywood counterparts and such attempts could be technically suicidal. The local practitioners, hence, look like pedestrian vagabonds on the field and they keep struggling to have a place. Their manner of presentation irritates the elite audience who would prefer to patronize the original versions in Hollywood. The inferior outlook it gives our films at the global market as a result of the special effects that are substandard is worrisome. Again, most sex scenes in Nollywood films are incongruous. An example is watching sex partners cover themselves with duvet in sex scenes. Hollywood directors are bold enough to promote nudity, an aspect that is alien to our culture. One of the reasons Indian and Chinese films are thriving on the global market is because their directors have chosen to engage their culture in their stories. Bollywood, for instance, employs her cultural elements as evident in their make-up, costumes, dance and dialogue and then, rely on subtitles to engage the global market.

Culture is the totality of the way of life of a society. Onuzulike asserts that: “*Cultures are the creation of human interaction, something we learn, not an instinct*” (179). America would not be interested in how we produce our films because they know it better (since they are the manufacturers of the facilities) but would be inquisitive about what we produce if it represents our culture. It, therefore, means, the ‘what’ is more important to them than the ‘how’. If we can’t beat them in technology, we can, with our contents. Our contents should, then, be enveloped by the culture we represent and then subtitled in the language they understand. Unfortunately, except for Tunde Kelani and perhaps very few others, Nollywood moviemakers are contributors to the erosion of culture. Onuzulike corroborates this in his submission:

Many Nollywood moviemakers are turning their backs on Nigerian culture. The reasons could be economic, audience demand and low esteem in their heritage. Some Nollywood filmmakers maintain African themes in their movies, notably, Tunde Kelani who promotes Yoruba cultural heritage in his movies (184).

Therefore, it becomes imperative to present Yoruba video-films to the global audience in a form that communicates the theme, plot and dialogue without losing its originality.

Subtitling: A Discourse

Several researchers have attempted to define *subtitling* in different ways which are based on varying perspectives. However, it must be noted that a number of features are consistent in all of these definitions. According to a notable subtitle researcher, Gottlieb, “*subtitling* is the rendering in a different language of verbal messages in filmic media, in the shape of one or more lines of written text, presented on the screen in synch with the original verbal message” (86). Similarly, subtitles are defined by Ibbi as “captions displayed at the bottom of a cinema or television screen that translate or transcribe the dialogue or narrative” (47).

In their definition on subtitles, Luyken et al. emphasize that subtitles are always added during post-production and must be timed to appear in synchrony with the original dialogue:

Subtitles are defined as condensed written translations of original dialogue which appear as lines of text, usually positioned towards the foot of the screen. Subtitles appear and disappear to coincide in time with the corresponding portion of the original dialogue and are almost always added to the screen image at a later date as a post-production activity (Luyken et al. qtd. in Szu-Yu Kuo 62).

Nir posits that *subtitling* is ‘the most prevalent form of [film] translation. It is used in all kinds of feature films, popular-science films, and news items in which people speak a foreign language. *Subtitling* is

also an area of study that is developing rapidly in Africa due to its functionality, versatility and adaptability (qtd in Mubenga 1).

Subtitling may be seen as an escape route for deficient spectators. For example, a number of scholars place an emphasis on the role of subtitles when communicating with the deaf and hard-of-hearing. Ibbi opines that: “voiceover which would have been a better choice will not be beneficial to viewers with hearing disabilities” (48). As a physical impairment, deafness makes it difficult for people to access information. *Subtitling*, therefore, serves as a proxy to which films can be satisfactorily enjoyed by the hearing-impaired.

When considered from a linguistic perspective, there are basically two types of *subtitles*: interlingual and intralingual (Ghaemi and Benyami 3). Jorge Diaz-Cintas defines Interlingual subtitles as a form of subtitle where the spoken/written passage of the original program is translated into a target language (TL). Penayota Geoga Kopoulou adds that Interlingual subtitles “is a type of language transfer in which the translation does not replace the original Source Text (ST) but rather both are present in synchrony in the version” (qtd. in Kamenicka 8)

Based on the above definitions, the following can be identified as essential characteristics of well-prepared subtitles:

- i. It is a form of written/typed translation.
- ii. It replaces a source language (SL) with the target language (TL) of the intended audience.
- iii. It must retain its meaning across languages.
- iv. It is displayed on the screen (usually at the bottom).
- v. It must synchronize with the original dialogue, soundtrack and other verbal information transmitted as part of the visual image.

Though being a propitious medium of information transfer, *subtitling* suffers the risk of original lingual preservation. A word (from a source language) may have diverse meanings in various target languages and this can be challenging for subtitlers. Szu-Yu Kuo elucidates this in his postulation that ‘the preservation of meaning across languages is an arduous and challenging task for translators, since many

words and expressions in one language simply do not exist in another, or have different connotations. (Szu-Yu Kuo 27)

This is corroborated by Dries as he posits that:

The translator has to make sure that the meaning of the original sentence is conveyed to the audience and fits the scene without having to compromise the linguistic beauty of the source language (for instance, rhythm) (qtd. in Han Zhao 21)

Theoretical framework

The semantic theory

The theory of Semantics deals with meaning, i.e. it characterizes meaning distinctively and conspicuously. It is based on the notion that the theory possesses the ability to capture meanings of language object expressions:

A Semantic theory should exactly capture meaning, telling us exactly what the meanings of the language object expressions are. It needs to provide characterization of object language expressions that no non-synonymous expressions satisfy, and it needs to do so in a transparent way (Haverkamp et al, 1)

Semantics explains the relationship between expressions in a natural language and the world. Van Eijck perceives the Semantic Theory as ‘a collection of rules for specifying the interpretation of a class of natural language expressions’ (21). Semantics implies the breaking down of sentences, words, signals and structure to enable easy understanding. Betti et al. identifies this theory as:

how meaning works in language, and because of this it often uses native speaker intuitions about the meaning of words, phrases to base research on. We all understand semantics already on a subconscious level, it’s how we understand each other when we speak (3)

Lyons agrees to this:

Semantics is the study of these context-independent meaning element which are tied to the linguistic expression, that is, of the linguistic signs as part such (signs taken roughly in Saussure's sense, and are (considered to be) invariant across all situation of use (qtd. in Adekunle 199)

Film subtitlers who understand the basic theory of semantics will be able to translate and/or transliterate sentences with ease. This is because semantics looks at the relationship in language and how meanings are conceived. A professional subtitler who understands the meanings of individual words will successfully manipulate contextual interpretations of dialogues.

Highlighting the differences in the internal structure of words, Levin et al theorize that conceptual semantics is:

an effort to explain the properties of argument structure. The argument behind this theory is that the syntactic properties of phrases reflect the meanings of word that head them. With this theory, linguists can better deal with the fact that subtle differences in the syntactic structure in word meaning correlate with other differences that the word appears in (qtd. in Betti et al, 7)

This aspect of semantics deals with the formation of word before the inclusion of contexts. For example, at its most basic, we know cougar to be a large wild cat. But, the word cougar has also come to indicate an older woman who's dating a younger man. This is where context is important (Betti, 7).

Adejare et al. further expounds the theory of Semantics by a number of classifications:

The mentalistic theory of meaning conceives the meaning of expression as the idea or concept associated with the expression in the mind a person familiar with the expression. Verificationist theory opines that an expression means what is determined by the verifiability of sentences or propositions within which it is found.

Functional theory holds that an expression means what is used to signify in a language. To the Behaviourist theory, an expression is conceived to mean either the stimulus that evokes it in the speaker or the response that the expression invokes in the listener; or both stimulus and response in each context of use (qtd. in Williams 32)

To Williams, the field of Semantics:

Consists of the ability to associate one thing (an image, word) with the other. It is the ability to remember that chair refers to the concept 'chair'. In other words, wherever there is a word or an image there will be a concept. This concept in turn will be the meaning of the word or image. Meaning is a production codes and conventions which give room for continual adjustment (32)

The Concepts of Translation and Transliteration

The concept of Translation is always uni-directional; that is, conversion from a Source Language to a Target language. Catford perceives translation as "the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL)" (20).

This is corroborated by Nugroho:

Translation is an effort of finding equivalent meaning of a text into the second language. We emphasize meaning equivalence since in translation meaning is the object to be rendered from the source language text into the target language text. In this case, translator is faced with a text as units of meaning in the form of sets of words or sentences. (1)

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Transliteration can therefore, be referred to as ‘the representation of words and phrases of one language by the alphabets of another’. It may also be defined as ‘the spelling of words from one language with characters from the alphabet of another. Ideally, it is a one-for-one character-by-character replacement’ (254). Some film subtitlers assume that translation is equivalent to transliteration. The differences between the two are quite distinctive. Translation tells you the meaning of words in another language while Transliteration changes the letters from one alphabet or language into the corresponding. Faruquzzaman Akan agrees with this statement:

Transliteration is a type of conversion of a term or text from one script to another that involves swapping letters while a translation is to convey the meaning of a written text of one language to another. Transliteration is not primarily concerned with representing the sounds of the original but rather with representing the characters, ideally accurately and unambiguously. (2)

Simply put, translation allows words in one language to be understood by those who speak another language. This basically means that translation of a foreign language requires interpreting its meaning. In contrast, transliteration makes a language more accessible to audiences who are unfamiliar with the alphabet of that language. Transliteration therefore, concentrates on pronunciation than meaning.

Conclusions

The essence of *subtitling* as a tool for communication in popular Yoruba video-films cannot be undermined. However, it is imperative to understand that Nigeria, being a multilingual, multicultural and multiethnic nation has adopted English as her official language after independence from British colonial rule in 1960. By extension, therefore, the choice of English as a language of translation in Yoruba video-films is sacrosanct. By the virtue of this, the use of subtitles as a communication medium is to make Nigerians and non-Nigerians to understand the language employed in the film.

This paper has made an attempt to highlight core purposes of *subtitling* in Yoruba video-films as well as explaining the scope of language as a mode of communication. The author seeks to further examine the dual concepts of translation and transliteration. This is important because these two concepts (translation and transliteration) are key methods used by Yoruba filmmakers to create a link between themselves and their target audience.

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