Présentation sous-titrage Autoportrait d'un schizophrène

If you've watched *Self-portrait of a Schizophrenic*, even if you aren't a translator, you've probably realized that it's a challenging film to subtitle. At first, it even feels impossible. That's certainly how I felt the first time I watched it! Why is that?

One way to describe the translation process is as having three steps: **PP** decoding, disambiguation and encoding.
Decoding is just another word for understanding the source text you need to translate. (I'm using the word "text" in a very loose sense here. It includes not only written texts but also audiovisual material.) Specifically, decoding or understanding the film you want to subtitle means that you need to understand the audio, the spoken language, the words, in relation to the visual, the moving images.
During the second step, **disambiguation**, you establish a single semantic, hopefully consistent interpretation of the language units you want to translate (from words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs or chapters to the whole text and the other way round).
The **encoding** stage is when you produce the target text, the translation or the subtitles in another language.
Of course, I've just highly oversimplified the process. These three stages usually happen simultaneously and there are still a lot of things we don't know about the whole "black box" of translating. It's certainly going to keep psycholinguists busy in years to come. However, for the purpose of this presentation, let's use this as our starting point.

Putting aside the slight feeling of anxiety that watching this film for the first time might cause and considering this decoding/disambiguation/encoding process, why does *Self-portrait of a Schizophrenic* feel so challenging to subtitle and how do you deal with the challenges?

At the **decoding** stage, we are faced with an uncommon film and uncommon language.
This film hasn't been designed to convey clinical information in a logical, structured way. It doesn't really tell a story either, even if it has a "discreetly narrative form" as Joël writes in his analysis of the film on MedFilm.
Moreover, on a linguistic level, the grammatical, prosodical and semantical units of the spoken text aren't always easy to perceive and distinguish from one another. Even a native French speaker doesn't always know where some of the sentences start or end.
As a result, it is much more difficult to apprehend the typology of this text, which is an important element to take into account when working on a translation. You don't translate a love letter, an instruction manual for a microwave and a consent form for a clinical trial in the same way. You don't subtitle a chick flick, a video on wealth management and a film featuring an autopsy in the same way. The type of text or film you're working on gives you a very useful frame. With *Self-portrait of a Schizophrenic*, that frame is elusive because the type of text you're dealing with isn't obvious.
So to solve this quandary and determine the type of text I was dealing with, I started by transcribing the audio. which is something I don't normally do when working from a French film, just because I usually "get" it just by listening to it. But this time I didn't. I needed to transcribe it to become acquainted with it. As I was writing everything down as carefully as possible **PP,** I noticed unusual word pairings (about which I'm going to say a little more in a minute), fluid structures, especially at the sentence level, word and sound plays, and rhymes that made me think of poetry. I also noted that the film references two literary works **PP** (*The Song of Songs* from the Bible **PAUSE** and *Oedipus the King,* the Greek tragedy by Sophocles). It reinforced my decision to treat the subtitling of *Self-portrait of a Schizophrenic* like the translation of a poem.

So, just a quick word about those unusual word associations you can find everywhere in the film (and we're still at the decoding stage here):

Here are some examples: **PP**

The reason why these unusual word associations surprise us or even unsettle us can be found in the linguistic concept of *collocation*. A collocation is defined as the specific way some words are arranged or paired in a specific language. Simply put, the concept o*f collocation* means that some words *"go* t*ogether"* and some just don't. For example, in English you say *a strong coffee* and *a powerful compute*r. You wouldn't ordinarily say *a powerful coffee* (even if it keeps you awake at night) and *a strong computer*. Also collocations aren't transposable from one language to the other. For example, in English you say *to run for president* but in French it's *se présenter à l'élection présidentielle* (nobody runs, or if they do, it's something different).

The second stage in the translation process, **disambiguation**, merges with the first one when the meaning of the sentences, of the phrases, of the words is univocal. However, here's an example where disambiguation is needed. **PP**

Ravi as an adjective in a sentence like this one can mean either *delighted* or *stolen*. So which one is it? Delighted freedom glistens? Or stolen freedom? But what if it was the author's intention all along to use a word with a double meaning? How does a translator deal with that?

Finally, the **encoding** stage is where we solve these problems, answer these questions or at least make decisions in order to produce an acceptable translation.
With *Self-portrait of a schizophrenic*, once I determined that I was going to treat it like a poem, it gave me the kind of frame I needed to start making decisions. One of them was to use only minimal punctuation in my subtitles to avoid imposing a structure (hence an interpretation) on something that resembles a free-form poem. The other decision was to try and use words of a higher register whenever possible in accordance with the literary genre.
Then I tried to rhyme my subtitles whenever the source text rhymed, and to stay as close as possible to the original rhythm (especially in terms of number of syllables) whenever possible. Some reading spectators don't perceive rhymes and rhythm but for those who do, I thought it was important to prevent the discordance of listening to a text that rhymes while reading a text that doesn't.
Then I made the decision to stay as close as possible to the source text with my translation. Depending on the type of translation you do (medical, legal, marketing, technical, audiovisual, literary, etc), you don't necessarily stay very close to the original text. For example, consider translation in the field of advertising. Adverts often rely on word play. However, if you translate a play on words literally, it's probably going to sound wooden or weird because you'll lose the linguistic and/or cultural references. You'll probably have to look for a very different play on words in the target language to make sure customers feel like buying that fancy car or that mouth-watering strawberry yogurt. So your translation of an ad might end up quite far from your source text.
Of course, medical translation is very different. This is not a field where a translator is supposed to demonstrate their linguistic creativity. In medical translation we stay as close to the source text as grammar and language fluency will allow.
Audiovisual translation is another story. Because the number of characters we can use is limited to keep our subtitles readable, we have to look for ways to be as concise as possible, which often forces us to move away from the source text. (Of course, when you do audiovisual medical translation, you end up with quite a paradox on your hands.)

And so, it was quite an unusual choice for an audiovisual translation to decide to stay as close as possible to the source text when subtitling *Self-portrait of a Schizophrenic* but I made it to try and keep the feeling of strangeness and the anguish oozing from it. Fortunately, it isn't a very "chatty" film. The text isn't spoken too fast and there were only a couple of instances where I had to compromise with my translation because of readability issues.

Once those decisions are made, how do you solve the disambiguation issues? This is an area where audiovisual translators have less leeway than most non-audiovisual translators because we can't add translator's notes to our subtitles. **Retour même PP**

I couldn't find a way to convey both meanings of "ravie" (delighted and stolen) so I had to decide on one and one only. The method I used to make that decision is unique to audiovisual translation because it is based on the relationship between text and image. You could call it using the audiovisual context. **PP**
When you look at the film while French singer Léo Ferret is singing that line, you can see the smiling face of a child. This is also a moment in the film where the mood is more joyous, shots are more luminous, a happy childhood is alluded to. That's why I decided to translate "ravie" with delighted.

At 7 years old he produced novels on the life of the great desert where <mark>delighted</mark> *freedom glistens.*

I still feel a bit frustrated about not being able to convey the second meaning of stolen in my subtitle though so if any of you has an idea, please, just let me know!

So far, I have talked a lot about subtitling this film from a linguistic point of view. To conclude, I'd like to say a few words about the visual aspect of subtitles.
I usually tell my interns not to make subtitles that twinkle on the screen like a Christmas garland. What I mean by that is that when someone's uttering several sentences without a pause, the corresponding subtitles should flow seamlessly one after the other with only the minimum gap required between them (that's four or five images depending on the situation). If the gap is slightly longer, your attention is drawn to the appearance and disappearance of the subtitles and it's very uncomfortable to watch.
I also tell interns to let their subtitles "breathe". The rule for when a subtitle should appear on screen is very strict. A subtitle should appear at the exact moment the person starts to talk. You have more freedom when deciding when a subtitle should disappear. If you make it disappear at the exact moment the person stops talking, it's actually pretty disturbing. The subtitle looks "guillotined", the reading spectator is unpleasantly surprised and each time the reading spectator is surprised they lose time and risk falling behind on reading the subtitles. What you should do as a subtitler is extend your subtitle by a few images to give it "breathing room".
Well, this time for once, I did the exact contrary. As the film conveys an impression of anguish and discomfort, to say the least, I decided to make uncomfortable, slightly aggressive subtitles, that is guillotined, Christmas garland subtitles whenever they seemed to match the general mood and rhythm of the film. **OUVRIR FICHIER AVEC VLC**

I encountered one last visual issue when subtitling *Self-portrait of a Schizophrenic*. This is a film where the image shifts and where several shots are off-centre to match the disturbed state of mind of that person. However, I can only produce horizontal subtitles. And what annoys me is that their presence reestablishes horizontal and vertical axes. They suggest right angles and anchor the images in a Cartesian coordinate system again, which seems to contradict what both this schizophrenic person and Éric Duvivier wanted to convey with this film. This is the kind of instance where I wish I could use creative subtitles instead of well-behaved subtitles.

Here are a couple of examples of creative subtitles from a Russian horror film film called *Night Watch* from 2004 where the director worked on the subtitles himself and integrated them into the film as an additional character: **PP**

For *Self-portrait of a Schizophrenic*, I would love to be able to make diagonal subtitles or subtitles that oscillate, disintegrate or burst out to accompany its general mood.

Thank you.

Élisabeth Fuchs, September 2020.