

AUDIO-VISUAL TRANSLATION: SUBTITLING AND DUBBING CHALLENGES

In recent decades, audio-visual translation (AVT) has gained increasing importance due to the global expansion of multimedia. As films, series, video games, and online content spread across linguistic borders, the need for accessible and culturally appropriate translation has grown dramatically [4].

The aim of this article is to explore the challenges and specific features of audio-visual translation (AVT), with a particular focus on subtitling and dubbing. It seeks to highlight the linguistic, technical, and cultural complexities involved in each mode, analyze their impact on audience reception, and discuss the strategies used to preserve meaning, humour, and cultural relevance in the target language.

Among the most prominent AVT modes, there are subtitling and dubbing – both widely used but fundamentally different in nature.

Subtitling involves converting a spoken dialogue into a written text on the screen. This method is more economical and faster than dubbing and preserves the original soundtrack and performance. However, subtitling presents challenges: space constraints (usually two lines with 35 – 40 characters each), synchronization with audio, and the need to condense speech while maintaining meaning. Moreover, cultural references must be carefully adapted. For example, the English “prom” in American high school films may be subtitled simply as “выпускний вечір” in Ukrainian, though it may miss some cultural connotations.

Dubbing, by contrast, replaces the original audio with a target-language version performed by actors. It allows for a more immersive viewer experience, especially for children or audiences unfamiliar with foreign languages [3]. However, it requires careful lip synchronization, emotional tone matching, and script adaptation. A well-known example is Disney’s “Frozen”: its Ukrainian version became popular due to localized song lyrics and expressive voice acting, which resonated deeply with the local audience.

There are numerous critical translation issues relevant to both subtitling and dubbing. Word choice can be tricky, especially if there is no equivalent in the target language, resulting in the original word being left intact and causing audience confusion [6].

Both approaches raise cultural translation issues. Subtitlers tend to preserve more of the original culture (a strategy known as foreignization), while dubbing often adapts content to local norms (domestication). For instance, jokes or idioms like “raining cats and dogs” might be localized to a phrase familiar to the target audience or even substituted entirely. In “The Simpsons”, political or celebrity references are often changed, depending on the country, to keep the humour relevant.

An additional challenge is translating humour, wordplay, and slang. In sitcoms like “Friends” or “The Office”, humour often depends on context, timing, or cultural assumptions. Direct translation may lose its effect, requiring creative solutions. In the Ukrainian version of “Shrek”, for instance, translators replaced some jokes with local equivalents that would elicit laughter from a domestic audience.

Video game localization, a growing AVT branch, includes adapting dialogues, names, and interface elements. Japanese games like “Pokémon” have had significant localization changes: names of creatures, cities, and cultural items were adapted to be more relatable for Western players.

Subtitling can also serve educational purposes. Research suggests it enhances language learning by improving reading speed, vocabulary retention, and listening comprehension. Some countries, like the Netherlands, intentionally favour subtitling over dubbing to support foreign language acquisition.

In conclusion, both subtitling and dubbing play vital roles in making content accessible across cultures. They each require a unique set of linguistic, technical, and creative skills. While subtitling emphasizes brevity and fidelity, dubbing focuses on performance and immersion. As international media continues to grow, high-quality AVT remains essential to global communication.

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