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Interview with freelance audiovisual translator Anna Matamala
25 September 2004



1) What are the working conditions of audiovisual translators today?

I think that most audiovisual translators —at least in Catalonia— are freelancers. In my particular case, I am a freelance translator working mainly for the Catalan television (Televisió de Catalunya) through different dubbing studios in Barcelona. In 1996 I passed an examination which authorises me to translate products bought by the Catalan television, but translations are given to me by different dubbing studios that have won a contract after submitting a tender to the Catalan television at the beginning of each year.

As far as working conditions are concerned, we usually have to work against the clock, not only because dubbing studios push us to do so but also because our fees are not as high as we would like them to be. Moreover, sometimes our job is complicated by the fact that the transcript available is not complete or there is no dialogue list available.

2) What are the specific features of translation for voice-over?

Voice-over is a type of audiovisual translation usually associated with non-fictional products in the Catalan and Spanish context. The original voice is heard underneath the translated version, which usually —not always— starts after hearing a few seconds of the original version and finishes a few seconds before. There is no lip-synch but a certain synchrony text-image is maintained. It is said to create a certain illusion of authenticity.

As Orero says in an article published in *Jostrans* (issue 3), I think we should distinguish two types of job contexts in voice-over: those translators who work for preproduction —who usually work without a script and have to write down time codes in their translation—, and those who work for postproduction, that is to say, those who usually translate finished documentaries with a transcript. Within the postproduction group we should also distinguish those who take care of the translation, write down time codes and revise the linguistic quality of the product and those who are 'just' in charge of the translation. I include myself in the latter group.

Although the first group has to overcome an added difficulty (understanding an original product), I would underline as a common problem the need to reword the interviewee's intervention (full of hesitations and oral features) in order to create an understandable text with a controlled length which will be read aloud.

On the other hand, and taking into account voice-over is usually related to non-fictional genres in Catalonia, a wide documentation process is generally required and terminological problems have to be solved, although this is not exclusive of voice-over or documentaries.

3) You work mainly in dubbing and voice-over. How do you collaborate with other members of the team: producer, linguist, adapter...?

I think cooperation between all members of the team is very important. In my particular case, I have a very close relationship both with other translators and linguists. On the one hand, I usually get in touch with other translators by e-mail when we are translating a series, so that we can make common translation decisions and offer a unified product. For example, a couple of weeks ago, I was translating different episodes of Stargate with two colleagues and we got in touch on a daily basis. On the other hand, I usually get in touch not only with linguists who revise my translations and work for dubbing studios but also with linguists who are members of the permanent staff of the Catalan television. In fact, we can phone those linguists and ask them any question concerning the translation criteria, and there is even an American professional who helps us with comprehension problems.

As far as adapters are concerned, I must confess they do not usually phone me, although I try to help them as much as I can by including a lot of footnotes.

Finally, the product manager working in the dubbing studio is the person who contacts me when there is a film, episode or documentary to be translated, who keeps track of time limits and solves any problems concerning defective tapes, scripts, etc. So we are in touch at least once a week.

4) What languages do you deal with?

I usually translate from English into Catalan, but I can also translate from French. I have also done other types of translations into Spanish and I have also dealt with German and Portuguese, but I must confess they are my weakest languages.

5) Could you talk about the revision process in audiovisual translation, particularly as regards the work you do into Catalan?

When translating a product into Catalan, there is always a translator, an adapter and a linguist, who are generally different professionals but who can also be just one person doing different tasks. The linguist in particular is in charge of the revision of the translated and adapted version: he or she checks the final written version so that it conforms to the style book and there are no mistakes or inaccuracies, and also writes down notes concerning the pronunciation of problematic or foreign nouns. Then, once the product is received, the linguist revises the actors' pronunciation and, in case there is something wrong, he or she asks for a retake. Once the product is finished and sent to the Catalan television, a group of linguists who are members of the network's permanent staff revise the final version and, if they find an error, a retake is also requested. All these mechanisms are implemented to guarantee a certain degree of quality of the final product.

6) Catalan is a minority language. Can you identify any specific problems relating to the translation of programmes from a main language into a minority language, culturally and/or linguistically?

Rather than problems, I would like to talk about specific features or specificities when translating from English into Catalan because I think it is not more problematic to translate into a minority language than into a main language.

In the case of Catalan there is a whole normalisation process behind which clearly influences the translation process. I'm not saying that we are trying to create translations which completely coincide with the normative grammar. In fact, we are trying to create adequate products to a certain context, to a certain register.

However, it is true that sometimes we have to decide between units or structures proposed by the official bodies and units used by most people who are clearly loanwords from Spanish, and that's not easy because we want our translation to sound natural and credible but we are also aware of the normalisation process.

- 7) You translate a lot of documentaries from all over the world. How do you deal with the problem of terminological or lexical gaps in Catalan, which must be a very recurrent problem?

When I have a terminological doubt, I usually consult Termcat (www.termcat.net), apart from other resources. Termcat is a great terminological centre which offers a lot of information on the Net and which also answers questions by phone. If I can't find the translation of a certain term in the typical sources (Internet, encyclopaedia, textbooks, dictionaries, etc.), I phone them, I ask them which is the translation of a term and I usually receive a quick answer. Sometimes, when they don't have the solution in their databases, they phone me a few days later, after consulting specialists in the field.

Although Termcat is a very useful resource, sometimes we have to deliver a product before an answer is given and, then, we have to act as terminologists. In these cases, I try to contact specialists to know their opinion and I also take into account Termcat's recommendations concerning terminology creation which are available on-line (for example, when creating new animal terms, specially exotic species). However, all contexts are different and, whereas sometimes it is indispensable to use a term, in other contexts a more generic name can be used or the sentence can be slightly altered.

- 8) How do you teach voice-over?

I teach voice-over both on the Barcelona-based program and on the on-line version. The Barcelona-based program is a longer one and is taught by four lecturers from different backgrounds in 15 sessions. We have tried to define the different job contexts found in connection with voice-over so that students acquire skills which prove useful in the 'real world'.

The sessions I impart in the Barcelona-based program are devoted to voice-over for postproduction, in other words, translating a finished documentary with a transcript. After an initial theoretical explanation, students are asked to translate different short exercises, which are afterwards analysed. Each session tackles a different problem (proper names translation, terminological problems, translation from an unknown language with an English script, registers, etc.) and a different text type (science documentaries, historical documentaries, travel documentaries, interviews, etc.).

As far as the on-line version is concerned, it is a more synthetic course taught by myself within the dubbing module during a whole and intense week. Students learn to master the technique and develop their comprehension skills by translating both excerpts with and without a transcript with different difficulties (proper nouns, terms, etc.).

- 9) The course you teach on is offered on-line. Does this create difficulties? What strategies do you use to overcome the lack of face-to-face contact with students?

I think both courses (Barcelona-based and on-line) are interesting, although they are different and offer different possibilities to interact with students. On the on-

line version, although there is no face-to-face contact, there is an intense contact with students during all the unit. On the one hand, there is a forum where students and teachers interact and I must confess students are generally very active and they comment on a lot of questions. I also try to encourage them by asking and proposing different topics. On the other hand, at the end of the unit there is a chat where they ask all kind of questions. Finally, we also get in touch by e-mail. In overall, I would say that all these mechanisms overcome the lack of face-to-face contact and guarantee an intense contact.

10) Could you offer a word of advice to young translators eager to start working in the audiovisual world?

I just would like to encourage them because it is a very fascinating world, but a difficult one to get into. I would advise them to improve their command of their mother tongue and their listening comprehension of the foreign language, and not to give up hope and be always ready because you never know when you will be offered your first opportunity.

Anna Matamala works as a freelance translator for the Catalan television and translates films, series, cartoons and documentaries from English into Catalan for dubbing. She teaches voice-over and dubbing on the Master's Degree in Audiovisual Translation at the Universitat Autònoma, Barcelona. She has also worked as a copy-editor for the Catalan newspaper *El Punt*. She has just completed a PhD in Applied Linguistics at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra.