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To cite this article: Paula Camacho Roldán (2015) Subtitling for International Film Festivals: An Interview with Audiovisual Translator and Expert in Audiovisual Translation Dr. Jorge Díaz-Cintas, Translation Review, 92:1, 1-7, DOI: [10.1080/07374836.2015.1105167](https://doi.org/10.1080/07374836.2015.1105167)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07374836.2015.1105167>



Published online: 18 Dec 2015.



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SUBTITLING FOR INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVALS: AN INTERVIEW WITH AUDIOVISUAL TRANSLATOR AND EXPERT IN AUDIOVISUAL TRANSLATION DR. JORGE DÍAZ-CINTAS

Paula Camacho Roldán

Jorge Díaz-Cintas is a Reader in Translation and the Director of the Centre for Translation Studies (CenTraS) at University College London. He is the author of numerous articles and books on audiovisual translation, including *Audiovisual Translation: Subtitling* (with Aline Remael, 2007), *Theory and Practice of Subtitling* (2003), *Media for All* (co-editor, 2007), *The Didactics of Audiovisual Translation* (editor, 2008), *New Trends in Audiovisual Translation* (editor, 2009), *Audiovisual Translation: Language Transfer on Screen* (co-editor, 2009), and *New Insights into Audiovisual Translation and Media Accessibility* (co-edited, 2010). He was the president of the ESIST (European Association for Studies in Screen Translation) from 2002 to 2010 and is now codirecting it. He combines his teaching with professional translation and interpretation. He is a member of the research groups TransMedia and Trama. He also works as a freelance translator and interpreter and, since 2010, he has been the Chief Editor of the Peter Lang series *New Trends in Translation Studies*. He is an expert board member of the *EU LIND-Web* project.

Paula Camacho Roldán (PCR): In which ways is subtitling for international film festivals (SIFF from now on) different from other types of subtitling?

Jorge Díaz-Cintas (JDC): From a linguistic point of view, it is very similar to any other type of subtitling; the main difference is the technique used. Traditionally, in a film festival, there is someone behind the screen launching the subtitles manually. In the case of a DVD, these are already embedded and programmed to appear only at certain moments.

Technically, there are two main methods used for the projection of subtitles in cinema: we find screen time subtitles, and therefore they become an inseparable part of it in one single file. Having many obvious advantages, the tragic part of this is that if the subtitles are recorded in Bulgarian, for example, there is no way to do it on the same film in another language.

As the origin of a festival film is often remote and the future is usually uncertain, this is not the best option. Electronic subtitles are more suitable here and, in fact, these are the ones that festivals are using now. They are beamed by a projector onto the screen, without damaging the original copy, which is a great advantage. These subtitles can then be reused for projections in other language versions in different countries. In this second method, there are two different and independent files that are projected onto the screen, that is, both the film itself and the captions or electronic subtitles. At the beginning, these used to be projected electronically with manual cueing, appearing and disappearing too often, so two projections would never be the same. In prestigious film festivals such as Cannes, Berlin, or Venice, the subtitles are received

Translation Review 92: 1–7, 2015

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ISSN: 0737-4836 print/2164-0564 online

DOI: 10.1080/07374836.2015.1105167

already translated and spotted, that is, with a time code, ready to be used. Once they have been synchronized, they appear consistently from beginning to end; there is no need to throw them one by one, as was traditionally done in some smaller festivals, and also in the opera and the theater.

PCR: Does the subtitling process differ from small to big festivals?

JDC: I am not aware whether this has really changed with the economic crisis, but traditionally, all Spanish films that go from Spain to foreign film festivals that are of the A category, which are the most prestigious, have received a grant from the Film Institute for this purpose. They are projected in their original language with a set of subtitles in the language of the host country: German, if traveling to Berlin, or French in the case of Cannes; and another set in English, for the international audience.

PCR: And who does normally create the subtitles of those Spanish films?

JDC: Traditionally, Banda Aparte and Laser Films have always been the two leading translation agencies in Spain doing the subtitling for standard cinema projections, from English to Spanish and from French to Spanish. For those Spanish films going abroad, they have translated them into English.

PCR: So these agencies take full responsibility.

JDC: Yes, they do. Because the fact is that most film directors are not aware of the translation, they have no idea about the process of subtitling. They just leave this to the producer, who relies on the agency. It should not be like that, but unfortunately, it is. Another aspect that influences the process, along with this, is the time available for creating the subtitles. Movies to be shown at international film festivals normally arrive late. In most cases, they come from exotic countries where minority languages are spoken. Although the film may be Iranian, Czech, Portuguese, or Polish, the translator usually receives a dialogue list in English. So English is used as a pivot language, a widespread practice in this field. Unfortunately, the absence of nuances in both translations are very common. Not only that, there are also frequent errors, ambiguities, content-related and linguistic misunderstandings, and so on. And all this can have a very negative impact.

PCR: If an international film festival really wants to bet on quality, they should take care of that part of the process, that is, the translation of lesser-known languages via English.

JDC: They should be translated directly from the original. But we should take into account that the festival has to find an expert in Persian, for example, and this is not easy. On too many occasions, the festival needs to have the translation from one day to the next.

PCR: Is the lack of quality of the film translation due to economic reasons, or does it come from the fact that the direction of the festival does not care enough about this aspect?

JDC: I think there is a bit of everything. They are not aware of this imbalance when translating from one language or another, and how differently the information can be interpreted. In the case of film festivals, English is generally used in the master list for the preparation of multilingual subtitles of films shot originally in lesser-known languages. English is used as a pivot language or a bridge language, that is, an intermediary language. In order to translate any pair A and B, one translates A into P, and then from P into B. I imagine that there must also be an economic

conditioning. It is relatively easier, more direct, and faster to find a translator from English than to find someone to translate from other minor languages.

PCR: Especially if they always leave this to the translation agency. What if the festival hires freelancers? Would the cost be lower?

JDC: It would be cheaper.

PCR: Really?

JDC: Sure, but still what a festival pays for this today is very little, and the studio has to earn some profit. Ideally, a small company or agency is the best option. There are micro businesses fully dedicated to this. There is a small team of three or four people who pay taxes as a company but are self-employed. It is like working as a freelancer.

PCR: So this could be another point to be included in a possible quality proposal.

JDC: Yes, working directly with the translator rather than having an intermediary. But logistically, it is more complicated, taking into account the stress the organizing team of a festival normally goes through just before the film week. They might prefer to pay a little more to an intermediary. From the point of view of relationship, I always think it is better to work directly with the translator who has direct access to the material to be translated.

PCR: In your book *Film and Translation*, you refer to spotting as follows: "Many professionals believe that the ideal situation happens when the same person does the spotting and the translation." So going back to the matter of quality, do you mean that the quality of the final product would be better if the same person is responsible for everything?

JDC: Of course, and he or she will also have more control over it. The translator of commercial films is normally in charge of it all. In the case of American blockbusters, for example, where they have spent millions on marketing and have a worldwide distribution, a person, usually a native English speaker, assumes all the technical part. As that film is going to be translated into, let's say, fifteen languages, this general template of English subtitles is given to the different subtitlers of other languages.

In the case of a film that comes from Burkina Faso and visits the Seville International Film Festival, it is uncertain whether it will have a second life or if it will travel to another festival. So, in this case, the organizers in Seville would prefer to translate it directly from the original language into Spanish instead of creating a general template in English. If they knew that the film was going to take a tour of fifteen festivals, it would be advisable to create a common previous template. But the decision is in most cases made by the subtitle companies. In England, for example, and in many other parts of Europe, this company is Sub-Ti. In Spain, Subtitulam and Savinem have monopolized the market. As the coordinators and organizers of the film festival receive the films, these are sent to the pertinent company. To break that routine or that dynamic would be very difficult.

PCR: A small independent company, as you said before, may offer more quality, but the festivals prefer to be on the safe side and delegate that to the company, even if this is more expensive.

JDC: There is a very tiny company called 36caracteres in Madrid, which works primarily with film festivals, opera venues, and several theaters in Madrid. They have that market niche and translate

mainly from French and English. In England, there is another called Dayfornight. The woman who runs it is British of Indian origin. She is very committed to a kind of cinema that is outside the traditional circuit. She works a lot on Swedish, Bollywood films, and so on. Also, she usually works a lot for film festivals. For this case, she goes to freelancers from minority languages.

PCR: So let me ask you, do you think that the attention that SIFF receives from the direction of the festivals is enough?

JDC: No, it is not. I do not know whether there is a quality control, but there should be. Perhaps these companies that are responsible for doing the translation already have their own quality control systems. Let me give you an example with the case of the director of a film called *Aislados* (Isolated). He is French and has been living in Spain for years now. When he came to the London Festival, I went to see his film. After the screening, I had a chat with him. He was in shock. He told me that a distributor in the UK had liked it very much but would never distribute the film because of its subtitles. Apparently, the film seemed interesting to him, even with good dialogues, but he had not been able to follow them. The director had asked for a literal translation of the whole dialogue. As the budget had been very low, the story fell mainly upon the dialogues and the verbal interaction of the characters, so he wanted to make sure that nothing was lost in the translation. I remember he was very worried. If you bring your film to an international film festival, the only way to reach the audience is through translation. This keeps happening; there are some people who cannot think beyond their country. What may work in the film dialogue does not necessarily work with the subtitles. To start with, many times the dialogue has to be condensed and the duration of the subtitles must adhere to a regular viewer reading rhythm.

PCR: In the end, all has to do with a budget . . .

JDC: Well, this man had paid for the translation with a government grant. He ordered the dialogues to be translated literally. The translator, who was supposed to be an expert in subtitling, instead of saying no, just did what the director had asked. The resulting subtitles were unreadable, impossible to follow.

PCR: Precisely, in one of your articles you mention that the subtitler (or the project manager) has to deal with too many people, which makes things more difficult. For example, in the case you have just told me, a film director makes a suggestion to the subtitler, thus questioning his role as a cultural mediator.

JDC: Exactly. And this is something we would never see in other professions. I could never think of telling my doctor how to proceed with my own heart operation. He is the expert, so he knows how to do it. It should be the same thing with subtitling.

PCR: Do you think that more reception studies are necessary so that cases like this film, *Aislados*, are known, and more visible?

JDC: The organizers should have some fact sheets, that is, a basic and short document where the importance of the subtitles is enhanced and people can access that information straightaway. Everyone would be aware that it is impossible to read at the same speed that we are talking now, for example.

PCR: Can you develop this a bit? What do you mean exactly by fact sheets?

JDC: I am talking about a sheet containing facts, very basic information. Here it is widely used in medicine. For example: "AIDS is not spread by saliva." These are general ideas but totally unknown to most of us. One could be "we cannot read the same way we talk" or "subtitles must be condensed so that the information can reach the viewer," "subtitles must be legible," etc. Any film festival could have this on its web page, including the number of films that come with subtitles, so that people know beforehand. But this does not happen, even less among the distributors.

PCR: As you know, in Spain, many festivals are being threatened by budget cuts up to 50 percent, if not doomed to disappear. To what extent might this affect the final quality of the film translation?

JDC: If you have no money or minimal funds, you have to rely on friends, relatives, acquaintances, and neighbors. To what extent is this professional and how much goes against the nature of the translation? I would rather prefer not to do it than to do it wrong.

PCR: But this also promotes professional intrusion, don't you think?

JDC: Of course it does.

PCR: Do you think this may end up impoverishing the transmission of culture?

JDC: As we are cutting back on culture and giving to banks, we are sending a clear message: culture is not important, economy comes first. In this sense, there is a big risk of homogenizing culture, being colonized by the Americans, who will always have money to make their films reach everyone through their circuits and channels. As French, Italian, or German cinema does not have the same projection, they need to be protected.

PCR: In fact, for my research, I have contacted festivals that do not have that projection. However, they do have a quality program. For example, Pamplona Film Festival, *Punto de Vista*, here in Spain; they are very brave.

JDC: Yes, they have been the first in Spain to include accessibility, both in films and in the cinema. Their team members are great fighters and hard workers, near to self-exploitation. They work for too many hours and far too little money.

PCR: I would like to focus now on any existing research. How much relevance does SIFF have in academic research?

JDC: As far as I know, there is nothing done in this area. But it is a very interesting and original subject. However, the material that needs to be evaluated and analyzed is not easily available. Nowadays, most international film festivals still receive 35mm celluloid films. First, you need to have the film and, second, the subtitles, which are not the same as those later published in a DVD or watched on TV, if the film is commercially distributed. So it is really very difficult to access the material that is projected in a film festival, unless you decide to go and film the projection by yourself. And to do this, you need to be authorized. But, in terms of research, I am sure that nothing has been written, there have been just some talks and a presentation, as far as I can remember. Serena Scaldaferrì and Annalisa Sandrelli (UNINT) made a presentation in the last Media For All Congress on Sub-Ti. It was an experimental work focused on a particular case, a case study. I also know that a reception study was made in Vienna, but it was from films, not film

festivals. Austria, like Spain, is a dubbing country. At the end of a standard projection of a film with subtitles, people were interviewed at the door as they left the cinema. Also, a student of mine did a dissertation on titles for theater, which at some point may be similar to those launched manually at film festivals. But the truth is that, increasingly, less manual projection is made in film festivals.

PCR: What about your own line of research? Have you ever gone in depth? I know you have mentioned it in some of your articles.

JDC: Yes, I have mentioned it on some occasions but have always been scared of going deeper. To access the information and the material is too complicated. It is the same with cinema in general. We talk about film translation, but what really is being analyzed is the DVD or TV versions. It is illegal to enter the room and record the movie. Unless you have that copy and the subtitles of that film, you do not know whether you are working with what viewers have just seen or with the DVD subtitles. And they are not the same thing. The subtitle might not have been launched right the first time, or the editing of the film, once screened at the festival, might be altered for commercial distribution.

PCR: How can I approach this very new field then?

JDC: You should not enter the traditional door, which is to read all that has been written. You must make a kind of remake or evaluation of all that has been done and then make suggestions. The problem is that in this case there is virtually nothing done. The type of information you can gather is empirical or experimental, by talking to people, doing interviews, analyzing the film dialogues, etc. On the other hand, you should go through subtitling in general, as the linguistic part is the same for all types of subtitling. Your approach has to be more empirical, as I have just said. You should talk to the professionals and the subtitlers involved. I imagine how important timing is. And so is the economical aspect. In addition, you should also find out which method is being more used nowadays, closed captions or manual release, which may have an implication in all this. You could also consider whether there is usually time to check the translation, as sometimes there is no time for this. It would also be interesting to study the possibilities of seeing the material, that is, accessing a copy of the film. In the case of a blockbuster, if a copy exists, the translator is just given a very bad version of it to avoid pirating. Another line of research could be how the digital revolution affects the process of film translation. There are festivals that come to translate up to 200 films. It would be interesting to find out whether there are differences between a film that has been subtitled for a festival and another for television or a DVD format; differences at a linguistic and/or professional level. You could observe how subtitlers share, or not, the same pressures and the same type of work; or to what extent the way subtitles are projected can have an impact; or the perception of the public, if the public finds differences between one type of captioning or another, etc.

PCR: Is this type of audiovisual translation learned at universities?

JDC: Subtitling is taught within the field of Audiovisual Translation. However, subtitling for film festivals in particular is not. I know of some partnerships between some festivals and some universities. In Belgium, for example, the Brussels International Animation Film Festival, Anima, cooperates with some university students to do the subtitling. Also in Madrid, Imagineindia International Film Festival, the subtitles are done by translation students from

Universidad Complutense. Here in London the Department of Media, Languages and Culture from Roehampton University collaborates with the Spanish Film Festival of London. But they just help with the organization, because all the subtitling is made by Sub-Ti.

PCR: Given that in international film festivals there is a very direct contact among different languages and cultures, it seems unquestionable that this audience goes looking for cultural knowledge. In this sense, the role of subtitler as a cultural mediator is crucial.

JDC: In fact, the audience of a film festival is very different from the audience of commercial cinema. They are movie buffs, cinephiles. Among them there are also the film directors and producers, cultural agents, journalists, film critics, who can see that movie with a more critical eye. They are the ones to decide on its impact and its future, or whether it is going to be distributed, or just going to end up in the film festival. From this point of view, the quality of the translation should be given priority. The chances to go further will always increase if the translation is good. In the case of a Hollywood movie, the distribution is guaranteed. While in the case of a festival film, it is not.

PCR: So we have, on the one hand, a particularly demanding type of audience and, on the other, minority films without a guaranteed distribution, whose fate could be in the hands of a suitable translation.

JDC: That is it. Someone may say, "I did not like the film" simply because he or she has not understood it or because there was not a correlation between the film dialogue and the subtitle content. This person will never buy the distribution rights.

PCR: I see. Thank you very much for your time and advice.

JDC: It has been a pleasure. Good luck with your research.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paula Camacho Roldán holds a BA in English Studies (University of Seville) and a MA in International Communication, Translation and Interpreting (Universidad Pablo de Olavide). She took postgraduate courses at Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, one on Film Festival Production and another on Filmmaking (2009–2011). She is a filmmaker, freelance translator and lecturer at the Department of Philology and Translation in Pablo de Olavide University (Seville, Spain). She has some professional experience working for many film festivals, such as Barcelona's 1st Creative Common Film Festival, Gijón's International Film Festival or Seville's European Film Festival. Her research focuses on audiovisual translation and film criticism.