

Close-up on Subtitling and Dubbing on Argentine TV

By Patricia García Ces*

[Artículo publicado en *Conceptos*, revista institucional de la
UMSA, Universidad del Museo Social Argentino, Buenos Aires,
mayo-junio/julio-agosto 2002]

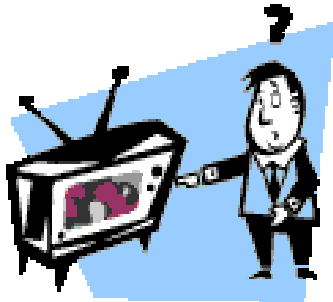
As local TV viewers watch a show, movie or documentary which has been subtitled or dubbed into Spanish –originally spoken in English–, they are certain to be startled, once and again, by characters or narrators saying extraordinarily odd lines, ranging from merely funny (e.g.: "Le haremos un funeral *propio*" –for "adecuado" - "proper"—, or "No es justo que dejes tu *promoción*" –for "ascenso" - "promotion"—) to utterly nonsensical (e.g.: "*Conoces todos los clichés de corazón*" –for "Sabes...de memoria" - "to know", "by heart"—, etc.).

In these cases, it is relatively easy for anybody speaking both the source (English) and the target (Spanish) languages to figure out what the original lines must have been and, therefore, what their 'equivalents' really mean. But is it not unfair that we should be continuously subjected to a most atrocious use of Spanish? It is also equally unfair that those who do not speak English should be often left wondering what a character means by recurrent, incoherent words or phrases. Why should we speak the foreign language of some material that is supposed to have been made accessible to us in our mother tongue, in order to really understand it? Above all, **why does a communication tool such as translation frequently seem to become the very obstacle it is meant to overcome?** It is definitely outrageous!

There is no denying that linguistic issues are strictly related to educational ones. These, in turn, arise from a country's policies –or lack thereof– regarding their cultural background and sense of belonging, as well as social and political standing, at a regional and global level. Unfortunately, Argentina does not have a tradition of relating its native language to the people's national identity. Nowadays, our whole educational system is on the verge of complete collapse. As for linguistic policy, it has never been seriously addressed in the first place. Nevertheless, this should not be an excuse for taking a *laissez faire* attitude, especially for translators or interpreters and educators in general.

Below is just a brief compilation of ‘hard evidence’ of the linguistic abuse often perpetrated against our mother tongue, gathered from both broadcast and paid TV —i.e. movies, shows, serials and documentaries aired on various channels—. The examples have been grouped according to the predominant type of mistake they contain.

a.- False Cognate/Meaning:



- “Consíguete a *alguien más*” (“a otro” - “somebody else”)
- “Hay indicios de que un intento de evacuación hubiera sido *prevenido* por las condiciones atmosféricas” (“impedido” - “prevented”) See also section d.
- “Los *oficiales* de la ciudad sabían que podría haber una explosión.” (“funcionarios” - “officials”)
- “Podría *modelar* mi personaje principal *sobre ti*.” (“*basar* mi personaje principal *en...*”/ “*tomarte como modelo para* mi personaje...” - “I may *model* my main character...”)
- “Ponen sus observaciones por escrito, así otros pueden *referirse a ellas*” (“consultarlas” - “refer to them”)
- “Tengo un *gracioso* presentiment” (“extraño”, “raro” - “funny”)

b.- Wrong collocation:

- “El sujeto 56 *perdió su mente*.” (“perdió la cabeza” / “enloqueció” - “to lose one’s mind”)
- “*Estoy en tratos* con este hombre.” (“Hago negocios”/ “Tengo trato” - “to have dealings with”)
- “Lo que trató de hacer está *fuera de línea*.” (“fuera de lugar” - “out of line”.)
- “Me han *sugerido* que el que *está mal* soy yo” (“insinuado”, “está equivocado” - “to suggest”, “to be wrong”)
- “No deberíamos *tomar* ese riesgo.” (“correr ese riesgo” - “to take/run a risk”)
- “¿Podrías *darme algo de claridad* en esto?” (“aclararme/explicarme” - “to throw/shed some light on”)
- “¡Y ahora *están vueltos locos!*” (“se volvieron locos” - “to go/get mad/crazy”)
- “Yo creo que, *en lo profundo*, entiendo por qué lo hiciste.” (“en el fondo”/ “muy dentro de mí” - “deep down”)

c.- Morphological error:

- “No está sosteniéndolo *propíamente*” (“apropiadamente”/“correctamente” – “properly”)
- “¿Por qué iba a *encelarme* de un millonario de 22 años?” (“sentir celos” – “to be/feel jealous”)
- “*Teoréticamente*,...” (“Teóricamente” – “Theoretically”)

d – Inadequate structure:

- “Hay indicios de que un intento de evacuación *hubiera* sido prevenido por las condiciones atmosféricas” (“...las condiciones atmosféricas habrían impedido un intento...” – “...an attempt to evacuate would have been prevented by the atmospheric conditions”)
- “Sé *cuán ocupado* está” (“lo ocupado que” / “que está muy ocupado” – “how busy”)

e.- Wrong use of prepositions/ possessives/ demonstratives:

- “No deje que lo interrumpa *de* su trabajo.” (“interrumpa su trabajo” – “to interrupt sbdy/sthg”)
- “Siento *este* gran peso en *mi* pecho...” (“*un* gran peso en *el* pecho” – “I feel this huge weight on my chest/heart?”)

f.- Lack of gender – article agreement:

- Feminine character: “Soy *un* civil.” (“una”)
- Feminine character: “Cuando era *un* oficial joven....” (“una”)

g- Unjustified Loan:

- “Si salió en alguno de los vehículos, aparecerá en el *GPS*.” (“sistema de posicionamiento global”)
- “Es *HIV* negativo” (“VIH”)
- “Las muestras de *DNA* no coinciden.” (“ADN”)
- “¿Mi madre no vendrá a mi *baby shower*?” (e.g.: “fiesta prenatal”, “fiesta de futura mamá”)

In cases like the above, I often look at those around me in search of signs of annoyance or, at least, uneasiness. Much to my bewilderment, I find no trace of any, though. I do hear people complain that they do not like reading subtitles and prefer movies or shows dubbed. However hardly ever do I hear any complaints

about the quality of the translation. I feel both insulted and embarrassed as a translator, and swindled as a viewer/consumer. Furthermore, I am deeply disappointed in my fellow consumers and, especially, my colleagues. Everyone seems to take it for granted that dubbed or subtitled material should be plagued by translation mistakes, thus inadvertently contributing to the perpetuation of the old-time saying: "*traduttori traditori*". Most viewers will surely complain about poor image or sound quality, for example, but not about an appalling translation. It seems as if meaning did not play a key role in what they watch! (But of course it does not! –you may be thinking, as you remember Big Brother stunning ratings.)

If many of us actually did something about it consistently (e.g. by formally complaining before the organizations concerned, such as cable/satellite providers and consumer rights associations, or joining translators guilds, etc.), TV networks would eventually require that the translation of the material they broadcast should be high quality or, at least, acceptable. This, in turn, would lead to recruiting graduate translators to do the job, thus contributing to further professionalization of the field and increasing job opportunities. However, unless we do seriously take a stand on the issue, our rights both as consumers and linguistic community will continue to be ignored. Furthermore, part of our duty as language specialists —or prospective ones— will remain unfulfilled.

(*) IESLV Translator. Lecturer of Linguistics and Terminology I & II,
School of Languages, UMSA. Lecturer of Technical & Scientific Translation, LSCI.

Sources:

Discovery Channel	TNT
Discovery Health	Uniserries
Fox	USA
Infinito	Warner Channel
I-Sat	

Bibliography:

Henrique, J., Rodríguez, P., Universidad de Vigo, "Traducción, sociedad y calidad", www.uvigo.es/webs/ho6/web573/personal/henr/ling/tyc.pdf, 2001

Jacobson, Holly E., Universidad de Arizona, Tucson Arizona, "Lo que crees que has dicho no es lo que creen que has dicho. Los efectos de los actos de habla en la comunicación transcultural", en Panace@ Vol. 2, n.º 6. Diciembre, 2001.

Larson, Mildred L., Meaning-based Translation: A Guide to Cross-Language Equivalence, University Press of America, Inc., USA, 1984.

Martinez de Sousa, J., Dudas y errores de lenguaje, Paraninfo S.A., Madrid, 1987.

Newmark, Peter, A Textbook of Translation, Prentice Hall International Ltd., UK, 1987.