

Subtitling proposal for Public Hearing

As Public Hearing continues to screen in countries outside of the United States, the issue of subtitles needs to be addressed, especially with its density of pure monologue and origin as a low-budget, self-made “closet drama” (line-for-line translation and subtitling services are cost prohibitive). Besides, the subjective attempt to capture the truth of what is uttered (the traditional goal of a good translator) contradicts the film’s origins: idiomatic spoken word recorded in machine shorthand at a civic event in progress, with imprecision amplified and further looped by computer transcription into the official text, publication as PDF on the town’s website, download and conversion into a shooting script, actors attempting to re-perform to their best ability, and another stage of transcription of the film itself for subtitle preparation. So from the start, Public Hearing is about what is lost in translation; what is heard yet perhaps not understood, and vice-versa. In fact, the original document makes as vague a promise as the movie itself:

“I HEREBY CERTIFY, that the foregoing transcript is a full, true and correct transcription of my machine shorthand notes so taken.”

New technologies push the conundrum into new conceptual territory. As DCP becomes the dominant screening format, a practically infinite number of languages can be delivered within embedded subtitle streams, available at the push of a button (while dual projection subtitling is nothing new, digital screening formats truly embody the argument). So with the material barrier of expensive duplicate film prints removed, all that is needed is an immaterial translator, which I have found in Google Translate, the accepted popular standard of automated translation. The use of Google’s clunky yet strangely poetic “statistical machine translations” is a natural fit, being a process which draws its intelligence from available texts on the internet, like the film. An example is Portuguese Portuguese versus Brazilian Portuguese. The Google translate service provides only one Portuguese, a hybrid blend weighted heavily towards the Brazilian, and baldly indicting the reality of populations density and information exchange, and the reverberations of imperialism.

While not right for every film, Google Translate allows low-budget filmmakers to make translations more widely available, despite a “poorer quality.” For virtually free, Public Hearing will be available in seventy-eight languages. The counter argument that the international audience’s experience will suffer misses the mark in terms of artistic experimentation, as well as the fact that English is understood world over—for most, the subtitles will be an informational complement within the privileged sphere of film festivals and art house cinemas, and for others, another to-be-expected bitter pill of globalization. It should be noted that that the accuracy of Google Translate evolves every day with uploads and user feedback, so the specific translations “locked-in” at time of translation shall serve as a sort of timestamp of our time, similar to the original transcript. My thinking has been inspired in part by Godard’s “Navajo English” subtitles used in Film Socialisme (2010). There, the presentation of the movie is a continuing part of its subject, with cultural differences becoming discourse rather than something to efface.

If this approach is implemented at a screening, the subtitles will be drawn from a master spreadsheet document with all languages corresponding literally from the English original time-coded text (dialogue sheet), regardless of grammar, formatting and culturally-appropriate timing. The result will be controlled chaos.

- jnkW