

# Audiovisual translation matters. On the sociolinguistic importance of audiovisual translation / *La traducción audiovisual lleva xera. Sobre la importancia sociolingüística de la traducción audiovisual*

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**Abstract:** From its early days, audiovisual translation has often been referred to as *constrained translation* (Titford, 1982; Mayoral, Kelly & Gallardo, 1988). Skilled audiovisual translators try to find creative solutions to deal with these constraints, yet some might argue inevitably *things get lost in translation*. However, from a sociolinguistic point of view, there is also a lot to be *gained* from translation. Especially, in minority and smaller language areas that tend to rely more on imported foreign content. More recently, the emergence of several streaming platforms has started to change the audiovisual media landscape, as well as media consumption and audiovisual translation practices. These content providers are mostly large American companies and they are often feared to flood smaller countries and regions with their American content. Because of this, attempts have been made to protect local markets. Even at EU level, measures are in place to promote European audiovisual media. Importing foreign content can broaden the audience's horizon, but the importance of making it accessible to a wide range of audiences with different linguistic preferences and special needs is often underrated. As a result, some content providers fail to adequately assess the implications of neglecting parts of their audiences. The impact of audiovisual translation, including dubbing of both local and foreign animation, is often underestimated. In this article, audiovisual translation practice is discussed, explaining sociolinguistic implications focussing on language planning (De Ridder & O'Connell, 2018) and linguistic diversity (De Ridder, 2019; 2020; 2021) in audiovisual content. It aims to raise more awareness of the role audiovisual translation can play and calls for better regulation.

## Keywords

audiovisual translation, minority language media studies, language planning, linguistic normalisation

**Resume:** Dende l'entamu de la disciplina, la traducción audiovisual conocióse davezu como una *traducción restrinxida* (Titford, 1982; Mayoral, Kelly & Gallardo, 1988). Traductores audiovisuales espertos traten d'alcontrar soluciones creatives qu'ayuden a facer frente a estes restricciones, magar que dellos apunten que, inevitablemente, dalgunes coses van perdese na traducción. Sicásí, dende'l puntu de vista de la sociolingüística, hai bien d'aspectos positivos que resulten de la traducción, especialmente, en llingües



minoritarias y territorios lingüísticos pequeños que tienden a importar contenido en lenguas extranjeras. Desde va un tiempo, la aparición de nuevas plataformas de *streaming* va cambiando el panorama de los medios audiovisuales al empujar que el consumo y las prácticas traductivas de lo audiovisual. Estos proveedores de contenido son a menudo empresas norteamericanas en forma de grandes a las que se les mira con interés por la capacidad de llenar huecos y países pequeños con contenido norteamericano, generando, por lo tanto, intentos de protección de mercados locales. Incluso a nivel europeo, también se miden que busquen promocionar los medios audiovisuales europeos. Importar contenido extranjero puede ampliar los horizontes de la audiencia, pero no se le da la atención suficiente a la importancia de hacerlo accesible a un rango de audiencias con preferencias lingüísticas específicas y necesidades especiales. Como resultado de esto, algunos proveedores de contenido fallan a la hora de evaluar cuidadosamente las implicaciones de afectar a miembros de la audiencia. El efecto de la traducción audiovisual, incluyendo el doblaje y la animación en lenguas locales y extranjeras, se discute en este artículo, tratándose la práctica de esta traducción audiovisual con el fin de explicar sus implicaciones sociolingüísticas centrándose en la planificación lingüística (De Ridder & O'Connell, 2018) y la diversidad lingüística (De Ridder, 2019; 2020; 2021) dentro del contenido audiovisual. Con ello se busca crear conciencia sobre el papel que juega la traducción audiovisual y cómo precisa de una mejor regulación.

**Palabras clave:** traducción audiovisual, estudios de los medios en lenguas minoritarias, planificación lingüística, normalización lingüística.

## INTRODUCTION

Translations are often considered *lesser* texts. The original is then believed to be *better*, as *things get lost in translation*. Moreover, translators may not even be reliable: do they convey the foreign-language source text faithfully? In the 17th Century, the French scholar Gilles Ménage introduced the notion of *les belles infidèles* [the unfaithful pretty ones] for well-written literary translations that deviate from the source text. Later, *traduttori, traditori* [translators – traitors] was used in Italy to express the inability of translations to convey nuances and other aspects of the source text in the target text. In audiovisual translation, dubbing, in particular, could be considered a rather suspicious activity, since the original source text dialogues are completely replaced by new dialogues in the target language. This means that translators could relatively easily take certain liberties with the source texts without the audience even noticing. Indeed, dubbing has also been instrumentalised to ideologically manipulate and censor films in Germany, Italy, Portugal and Spain (Ascheid, 1997; Díaz-Cintas, 2019; Mereu Keating, 2016). In the German version of *Casablanca*, which was released in the year 1952, ten years after the original American version, for example, almost all reference to Nazi Germany



was omitted. One of the characters, Victor Laszlo, who is a resistance fighter in the original version, suddenly became Victor Larsen, a Scandinavian physicist.

Unlike in dubbing, the source text is still audible in subtitling, which makes it easier to compare the translation with the original. That is, if one understands the source language. Yet, subtitles too have come under a lot of criticism. At the end of 2021, viewers watching the hugely popular Korean Netflix series *Squid game* caused a commotion when they criticised the English subtitles for impacting on the original characterisation and depiction of Korean culture. Some of this criticism was, however, based on the wrong assumption that subtitles can convey all subtleties and cultural references heard in the spoken dialogues. Subtitlers need to render speech in writing and only have one – in the case of bilingual subtitles commonly used in Belgian cinemas – or two lines at their disposal. This is one of the reasons why audiovisual translation is considered *constrained translation* (Titford, 1982; Mayoral, Kelly & Gallardo, 1988). Audiovisual translators have to overcome time and space constraints. They also have to take into account co-occurring images and sounds. In the case of dubbing, translation choices have to take into consideration visible mouth movements, as well as gestures. Furthermore, there are also additional genre-specific challenges, particularly in dubbing for children.

It is important to note that even in so-called *subtitling countries*, such as the Scandinavian countries or the Dutch language area, dubbing is commonly used for children's content. This is why this particular audiovisual translation mode needs to be studied outside of the so-called *dubbing countries* as well. Children's content often includes song and rhyme, which pose additional challenges for audiovisual translators. Moreover, a strict adherence to the linguistic standard is normally required and some distributors may even work with lists of words that cannot be used in the translation (e.g. references to religion and death). Because of all of these restrictions, some argue parts of the source text get *lost in translation*, although audiovisual translators also benefit from the two additional, aural and visual, communication channels. They do not have to make explicit in their translation what is conveyed through these channels. Nevertheless, in audiovisual fiction for children, the spoken dialogues often repeat information that is already conveyed through the other channels. Due to this deliberate redundancy, the younger viewers receive all relevant information via different channels to ensure this information can also be processed. Characters often repeat what is clearly visible in the images, or what has already been said. This also makes it possible for viewers who may not have full command of the language used in a children's programme to understand at least the broad outlines of the plot.



## 1. THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC IMPORTANCE OF AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA

From a sociolinguistic perspective, a lot can also be *gained from translation*, while locally produced content in the local language remains important. On the one hand, because it provides an impetus for the local creative industry. On the other, it also tends to give a more authentic expression of the local culture, but also more accurately displays linguistic reality. This, unfortunately, is rarely the case in translations, as they hardly reveal any linguistic diversity. In an analysis of children's content in Dutch-speaking Belgium, for example, the local content contained a wider range of different regional and social varieties of Dutch, unlike the translated content, particularly the translations offered by commercial content providers, in which mainly the dominant, *foreign* Netherlandic Dutch variety is used (De Ridder, 2020). Nevertheless, particularly in minority and smaller, minoritized language areas, audiovisual translation is a relatively easy and economical way to supplement local audiovisual content. Moreover, because of the ongoing competition between different content providers, more traditional television channels have to offer a range of different programmes to attract viewers and keep viewers satisfied.

In their volume on minority language media, Mike Cormack and Niamh Hourigan (2007) called for the development of Minority Media Studies, in which translation also plays an important role. Cormack (2004, p.4) listed the following four benefits of minority language media:

- (1) the electronic media can have an important symbolic role for language communities, a signal that the language and the community are able to cope fully with the contemporary world, rather than being simply part of an outdated heritage;
- (2) they can provide a real economic boost, including attractive career prospects for young people who want to work in the minority language;
- (3) they are important in developing a public sphere within a language community which allows a political community to develop and indeed allows the community to develop its own news agenda;
- (4) they are important in relation to how the community is represented both within itself and to outsiders (both aspects can have significant political and economic consequences).

Majority language speakers indeed also benefit from the integration of smaller languages in all areas of everyday life, as such exposure to linguistic diversity contributes to linguistic normalisation. Providing popular global content in the local language also contributes to increased exposure to this language. This not only helps viewers maintaining and developing their



language skills, hearing popular television characters use their language will also boost the linguistic prestige of a language minoritised by another. Seeing and hearing language reflected in such media, therefore, allows language users to recognise themselves in mass media, counter negative images they may be confronted with and, thus, have a positive impact on their linguistic self-esteem.

It is this importance of role models that Stephen Harold Riggins (1992, p.283) emphasised thirty years ago:

Ethnic minority media give the young an opportunity to relate to role models speaking their native language. The public validation of minority languages by their use in the media is important for their survival especially in the eyes of the young who would be most tempted to speak exclusively the majority language.

This is also a reason why sociolinguists should study the linguistic output of so-called *influencers*, more specifically *YouTubers*, from minority and minoritised language areas. What these young people all have in common is that they want to attract a large following and that they usually use their native language in their videos. Moreover, they tend to keep all of their videos, old and new, online, which makes it easy to study their linguistic output over time. In this way, it can be established if and, if so, in which way they may have started to adapt their language. While these vloggers and YouTubers tend to use their native language, some of them quite noticeably adapt their language to cater to a larger audience, not in the least speakers of dominant linguistic communities. Some YouTubers are very confident in using their own local language variety, while others try to use a neutral variety, in an effort to not reveal any features of their local language variety (De Ridder, 2020). They seem to assume this will help them attract more followers from other parts of the language area. Such creation of an artificial «neutral variety» aiming to be unmarked for any region is, in fact, also a phenomenon that occurs in dubbing in pluricentric language areas with several national varieties. One dubbed version is created and an attempt is made to use a «country-neutral» language variety avoiding marked features of the different national varieties. This version is then distributed all over the language area. In Belgium, the most popular Dutch-speaking YouTuber openly admitted that he started to change his Dutch to cater to (potential) followers from the Netherlands (*idem*). He tries to copy features of the dominant Netherlandic variety, but at the same time his local West-Flemish dialect, predominantly used in his first videos, still surfaces. In Dutch-speaking Belgium, not the Belgian YouTubers, but the YouTubers from the Netherlands are particularly popular. This is also the case in other language areas, in which YouTubers who speak the majority language or a dominant language variety also attract followers beyond their immediate speech community. As a result of



this, young audiences are ever more exposed to this majority language or dominant variety.

## 2. EMPOWERING DUBBING TEAMS

Deliberate interference with the source text in translation can also be driven by social activism (see Pérez-González, 2014; Tymoczko, 2007; 2010), for example, to counteract gender stereotyping in the source text or to restore gender imbalance in the dubbing process (De Ridder, 2019). As Maria Tymoczko put forward, «translators can be effective activists and empowered agents of social change» (2007, p.200) and this may require «a willingness to manipulate source texts in translation, so as to adapt and subordinate the texts to political and ideological agendas» (idem, p.215). Smaller language areas are known to import a lot of foreign content, but some of that content may, in its original form, not be deemed suitable for the local target audience. In that case, broadcasters can ask to make certain changes in the dubbed version. When audiovisual productions are imported, they usually include detailed instructions for the casting of the voice talents. These instructions refer to their gender and age, but also vocal attributes like voice pitch or accent (Chaume, 2012, pp.127-128). Nonetheless, broadcasters can always negotiate the terms on which they want to buy and broadcast these productions (De Ridder, 2020). In dubbed animation for children like *Super Wings* or *Trucktown*, broadcast by the Swedish public service broadcaster (SVT), some of the male characters depicting aeroplanes and trucks, for instance, were voiced by female voice talents to restore the gender imbalance in the original animated series (De Ridder, 2019).

Narrators in children's programmes and documentaries often tend to be men. This is quite problematic, as highlighted by Von Flotow and Josephy-Hernández (2018, p.299):

Women's healthy, sane, authoritative voices are almost never present, and certainly not used in voice-over, where the disembodied male 'voice-of-God', which connotes trustworthiness and authority to the general public, prevails.

In documentaries and children's fiction, this is even more problematic, as the narrator is usually highly knowledgeable and guides the viewer through the programmes. This means the above-mentioned «disembodied male 'voice-of-God'», in fact, is the 'voice-of-the-all-knowing-God'. The impact of gender stereotyping, linking certain qualities, in particular, to the male gender, has implications for gender role attribution in early childhood. Media scholar Kirsten Drotner (2018, p.384) pointed out that «the time spent with media is correlated



to the degree of gender stereotyping in young audiences». That is why SVT has insisted on making changes in the dubbing process in some imported programmes. In their Swedish versions of programmes like the Irish *Puffin Rock* and the British *Hey Duggee*, male narrators were replaced by female narrators (De Ridder, 2019). Sometimes, an attempt is made to compensate even for gender stereotypes that are visible in the images, by changing the original script. In the Swedish version of an Irish children's programme *Little Roy*, broadcast by SVT, for example, a line was added in the dubbed version explaining Roy's mother was out working, which was nowhere to be found in the source text (idem). In this programme (created by male producers), the mother is depicted as a housewife doing household chores mostly.

Similarly, sociolinguistic activism can empower dubbing teams to make deliberate linguistic alterations, such as using a particular (minority) language, specific accents or regionally marked lexis. When explaining why some countries are traditionally so-called *dubbing countries*, Luis Pérez-González (2009, p.18) puts forward that «countries with a *single linguistic community* [authors emphasis] – and hence a large potential market to secure a sizeable return on the investment» are more inclined to use dubbing, which is after all the most expensive audiovisual translation mode, rather than subtitling. These so-called *dubbing countries* in Europe are known to be France, Germany, Italy and Spain. What these countries have in common is that they have one official national language, which above all is spoken by well over 40 million citizens. Still, these countries by no means merely comprise «a single linguistic community». They include linguistic communities speaking other – albeit significantly smaller – regional and/or minority languages as well. The countries did, however, implement the «one nation, one language» principle and, as Pérez-González goes on to say, while referring to Ana Ballester Casado's research on dubbing in Spain, «the dissemination of a single dubbed version across the length and breadth of the national territory has been instrumental in achieving linguistic uniformity, to the detriment of regional dialects or minority languages (Ballester, 1995)».

Conversely, dubbing in the regional or minority languages could be used as a counterreaction against the overexposure to the dominant majority language in audiovisual media. Dubbing children's content, in particular, could in this sense be used as a language planning tool for language maintenance and normalisation. Ideally, this is done using professional technology and with the help of language professionals. In Ireland, several animation series have been dubbed into Irish Gaelic. The German series *Janoschs Traumstunde* was dubbed and *Scéalaíocht Janosch* was broadcast by the Irish public service broadcaster



around 1990 (O’Connell, 2003). In Asturias, the American animation series *Salty’s Lighthouse* from the late 1990s was dubbed in Asturian in collaboration with the Academia de la Llingua Asturiana. *El faru d’Iyán* was first aired in the early 2000s when it was broadcast by TeleAsturias. Creating such dubbed versions may be quite expensive, but one has to bear in mind that particularly children’s programmes tend to have several reruns and are broadcast over and over again. Yet, volunteer initiatives too could contribute to more audiovisual translation into minority languages. Just like there are several networks gathering volunteer interpreters and translators (e.g. Babels, Traduttori per la Pace, ECOS – Traductores e Intérpretes por la Solidaridad, Tlaxcala), audiovisual translators could also collaborate on regional and minority language dubbing. Roberto Avello-Rodríguez and Alberto Fernández-Costales (2020) recently called for such initiatives to translate audiovisual media into Asturian.

In the light of a wave of complaints about Belgian children’s overexposure to the dominant Netherlandic variety of Dutch in 2020 – which was even discussed in parliament, the Flemish public service broadcaster (VRT) prided itself on offering dubbed versions, predominantly, in the target audience’s own Belgian Dutch variety. In 2019, the Belgian Dutch version of an imported British animation *Bing Bunny*, however, caused a lot of commotion because it contained language mistakes. The fact that the public service broadcaster exposed children to language usage that deviated from the linguistic standard was considered unacceptable because of the educational role the broadcaster plays (De Ridder, 2019). These mistakes, were mostly copied from the source text, as the dubbing team was required to do according to the dubbing instructions. The producers of this animation for pre-schoolers deliberately added linguistic errors in the original version (e.g. «And I *finded* Hoppity») rather than «And I found Hoppity») to reflect the linguistic output of pre-schoolers. Such deviation from standard language usage in children’s television is quite new. In the past, clearly enunciated standard language was used in children’s television. More recently, though, young children who are not trained actors often do the dubbing and, in general, more linguistic diversity can be heard in such local productions. In *Bing Bunny*, for example, one character has an Irish accent and another one a non-native English accent. In the translated versions, however, the language usually is standardised and an attempt is made to use unmarked standard language accents. The language errors in *Bing Bunny* were part of the characterisation, but pressurised by a deluge of parent complaints about this dubbed version, VRT commissioned and obtained permission to broadcast a new dubbed version without language errors. In this case, no gender ideological, but educational concerns motivated the alterations for VRT’s young target audience.



### 3. THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC IMPORTANCE OF AUDIOVISUAL TRANSLATIONS

Just like with the emergence of new reading audiences with an unquenchable thirst for fiction, in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Netherlands, translations were used to satisfy the readers. Translated content can help to not only supplement, but also diversify the available content in the local languages. The current Age of Streaming also witnesses an increased interest in non-English content (e.g. *Nordic Noir* from Scandinavia) boosting audiovisual media production in smaller language areas, but also translation activity. As Michael Cronin (2003, p.139) put it «minority-language cultures are translation cultures par excellence», nonetheless, translation may also threaten these languages (Cronin, 1995; O’Connell & Walsh, 2006). Rather than developing new terminology and coinages for new concepts in order to retain their viability, the worry is that loan translations or even loanwords may be introduced into the vocabulary. This is why local productions remain important and it is crucial to maintain a good balance between local and translated content. Likewise, linguistic quality control is important in translation.

Since translations create language contact situations between the source language and the target language, linguistic interference between the larger source language and the target language is not uncommon. As Elke Teich (2003, p.207) put it: «In a translation into a given target language (TL), the translation may be oriented more towards the source language (SL), i.e. the SL shines through». This has been referred to as *translationese* and should, of course, be avoided: translation quality, in general, ought to be maintained. Especially, because today a lot of underpaid translators have to deal with large volumes and short deadlines. Not to mention, current practices of (post-edited) machine translations impacting on the quality of translations. In audiovisual translation, the effect of such linguistic interference in dubbing is called *dubbese*. In *dubbese* the source text surfaces just like in *translationese*. What is more, some fear it has lasting effects on the target language. In subtitling too, particularly the impact of English language content on subtitles has been studied by Danish audiovisual translation scholar Henrik Gottlieb (2004a; 2004b; 2005; 2012) who claims «there is no doubt that translations – not least those found in the popular media – constitute a driving force in what certain critics have seen as the corruption of domestic languages» (Gottlieb, 2005, p.176). Consequently, this calls for high-quality audiovisual translations, which is something public service broadcasters usually pay attention to. Unlike commercial broadcasters, public service broadcasters are often highly valued quality content providers, particularly for younger target audiences.



#### 4. AUDIOVISUAL TRANSLATION FOR CHILDREN AT PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTERS

The Swedish and the Flemish public service broadcasters are held in high esteem, particularly by parents of small children because of the quality content they provide for the youngest. They try to strike a balance between education and entertainment. The Flemish Public Service Broadcaster has for a long time been the most popular children's content provider in Dutch-speaking Belgium, unlike its counterpart in the Netherlands that has suffered a lot from competition with international players, such as Nickelodeon and Disney (De Ridder, 2019). Both SVT and VRT make sure they broadcast high-quality content which is also in line with local cultural standards and the expectations of its audience. VRT exposes its audience mainly to the Belgian variety of Dutch through its 50% local and 50% translated content. Looking at other commercial children's channels such as Nickelodeon and Disney Channel, but also streaming platforms like Disney+, the picture looks quite different. Those expose Belgian children mainly to imported content, in which the dubbed versions display predominantly the dominant variety of Dutch. They also offer so-called «hybrid versions», in which both varieties are used, but Belgian Dutch tends to be underrepresented. Such versions seem to be on the increase, as they are cheaper and can be used in both countries (De Ridder, 2020). The translations for the «hybrid versions» attempt to be unmarked for any specific country (the Netherlands or Belgian) and voice talents use either Standard Netherlandic Dutch or Standard Belgian Dutch pronunciation.

Sweden has 5 official minority languages: Sami, Finnish, Meänkieli (Tornedal Finnish), Yiddish, and Romani. SVT offers content in some of its indigenous minority languages. At present, a children's programme in Finnish (*Askarrellaan*) and three children's programmes in Sami can be streamed on their streaming platform SVT Play. *Binnabánnaš* is a local production that even comes in three different Sami versions. Not only in the North Sami variety, but also in two smaller Sami varieties: South and Lule Sami. What all of these programmes have in common, though, is that they come with open Swedish subtitles that cannot be turned off. Another children's programme available in Sami is, in fact, a rerun of a Swedish-language animation series from the 1980s *Skrotnisse och hans vänner*. The original Swedish version of the animation is available on the platform, but also a dubbed version in Sami. This version even features a real-live (male) narrator interacting with the viewers in Sami and providing an introduction and a conclusion. However, this programme too comes with open Swedish subtitles. What is more, in this show there is even a read-aloud option for the subtitles. This is to make subtitled programmes accessible



to viewers with visual impairments, but of course could also be activated for small children who cannot read yet. In *Hejolojla*, the third Sami programme, the use of open subtitles is rather strange, since this show targets pre-schoolers, who are not expected to be able to read the subtitles.

Undoubtedly, the subtitles in these minority-language programmes are well-intended. They are to support viewers, possibly a co-viewing adult or older children who may not master the minority languages and then can read the subtitles in Swedish in order to understand the programme. The subtitles, hence, are meant to make the programmes accessible to the Swedish-speaking viewers. Offering content in a minority language and making it accessible to viewers who do not speak it is also good in terms of linguistic normalisation of minority languages in Sweden. It is laudable that SVT pays a lot of attention to making children's content accessible, also in terms of media accessibility for the deaf and hard-of-hearing, and viewers with visual impairments. Just like in another locally produced show in which Swedish Sign Language is used, for instance, *Alice gillar att simma*. This programme is made accessible with the help of audiovisual translation: when Alice and the adult that accompanies her in each episode interact with each other, they use Swedish Sign Language, which is simultaneously rendered in Swedish through voice-over by a child and an adult voice talent. Additionally, same-language subtitles can be activated. The aim is not only to provide children's content in Swedish Sign Language for the deaf and hard-of-hearing, but also the linguistic normalisation of sign language. In this way, exposing hearing children to sign language also contributes to diversity and inclusion. The same, arguably, goes for the Sami and Finnish programmes that are made accessible to non-Sami and non-Finnish speaking viewers.

Nevertheless, as previously pointed out, the choice of open subtitles is also problematic (De Ridder & O'Connell, 2018). In the programmes available in Sami, this threatened minority language is overwritten by the majority language Swedish. Considering the history of linguistic suppression of Sami speakers, who were forced to learn Swedish in Sweden, this is indeed problematic. Eithne O'Connell (2011; 2013) made the same point about Scots and Irish Gaelic programmes that are «accompanied by open interlingual subtitles which transform the programme into an unbalanced bilingual offering, with the written English subtitles requiring more cognitive processing and therefore having more impact than the minority language aural soundtrack» (De Ridder & O'Connell, 2018, p.402). While, of course, there are advantages to offering subtitles to make the show accessible, one should be aware of the disadvantages from a sociolinguistic point of view. It is exposing majority language speakers to the minority language and offering them linguistic support,



but reading Sami or Finnish speakers will not benefit greatly from Swedish subtitles in terms of language maintenance. Younger viewers who cannot read the subtitles, will not be affected, as they will only be exposed to the Sami used in the programmes. Unless the read-aloud feature is available for the Swedish subtitles and activated, as they mute the Sami source text and replace it by Swedish. This, however, does not mean that subtitles *per se* are bad. Quite on the contrary. Open subtitles in the majority language are problematic, but providing same-language subtitles in the minority language would, actually, be a good thing. Subtitles in the minority language would be beneficial for the viewers who can read those because of the bi-modal input: viewers hearing and reading what they hear, is beneficial to their language and literacy development (Kothari, 2008). This, in fact, would call for open intralingual subtitling in all children's programmes.

## 5. THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC IMPACT OF AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA

In this Age of Streaming, in which viewers want to watch any content whenever, wherever and in whatever form they like, the option to enable or disable (both interlingual and intralingual – i.e. same-language) subtitles at least should be offered in the language settings. Moreover, distributors of audiovisual content are no longer restricted to one or a limited number of language settings. Streaming platforms have started to change the audiovisual media landscape including the way media are consumed, but also audiovisual translation practices. It is interesting that in Belgium, for example, dubbed and subtitled language versions in other languages and language varieties (e.g. Canadian French and Latin American Spanish) than the official languages, Dutch, French and German, are also available. Yet, streaming platforms like Netflix and Disney+ are feared to threaten smaller countries. That is why at EU level, measures are in place to protect the local audiovisual media market in Europe promoting the circulation of European content. International streaming platforms, for instance, have to spend 30% of their output on productions made in Europe. Similarly, at the national level, the promotion of local productions is stimulated. In Belgium, for example, a local streaming platform *Streamz* was launched in 2020, under the motto «Da's van onz» [It's ours], focussing on local Dutch-language productions. Besides, the production of such Dutch-language content has been actively encouraged with tax incentives for a few decades now. Even quota have been imposed on the public service broadcaster, in terms of the percentage of local programmes that have to be broadcast in primetime. At present this amounts to 65% of the prime-time content. By way of comparison,



about half of VRTs children's content is locally produced, while in Sweden the majority of SVT's children's content is imported and translated. It is important then that such localised programmes adhere to local language policies and preferences.

In this regard, the launch of Disney+ in Europe did not go unnoticed because, in some countries, language versions were missing. It did not include the existing Catalan dubbed versions of their content in Spain, only Spanish (Castilian) versions. In Belgium, they only included the Netherlandic Dutch versions, while the Belgians have been creating their own dubbed versions for more than two decades now. In Iceland, to cap it all, they only offered the original English version, no Icelandic dubbed versions. All of these available localised versions were not available on the platform. Pressurised by the local governments, they are now including these versions. Media scholars (e.g. Götz et al., 2018) have criticised children's television for not being inclusive and lacking diversity, yet a sociolinguistic focus seems to be missing in their research (e.g. De Ridder & O'Connell, 2018; De Ridder, 2019, 2020, 2021; Di Giovanni, 2011). What about linguistic diversity in children's content? In pluricentric language areas, parents complain about the overexposure to the dominant variety. Dutch-speaking parents in Belgium, for instance, have reported that their children copy the dominant Netherlandic Dutch variety they hear in dubbed animation, but also in YouTube videos because of the overexposure to this dominant variety (De Ridder, 2021). However, such phenomena are often downplayed as merely temporary phenomena that will not lead to children fully adopting this dominant variety.

Particularly in the case of minority languages, it remains difficult to pinpoint the actual impact media have, as several efforts to maintain and promote the use of the language co-occur. Joshua Fishman (2001, p.482) did not believe in the power of the media as a tool for minority language maintenance, which he called the «mass-media 'fetish'». He argued that they did not «constitute substitutes for the natural intergenerational mother tongue transmission process». Likewise, the impact of the media on language change has been downplayed. William Labov (2001, p.228) stated that «language is not systematically affected by the mass media, and is influenced primarily in face-to-face interaction with peers». Yet, Laurie Bauer and Peter Trudgill (1998, p.124) claimed that, in terms of vocabulary acquisition, «sociolinguists see some evidence for the mass media playing a role in the spread of vocabulary items. But at the deeper reaches of language change - sound changes and grammatical changes - the media have no significant effect at all». Some research from Canada, Scotland and Austria, however, does indicate that media can have an



impact on language change (e.g. Boberg, 2000, 2021; Muhr, 2003, Stuart-Smith et al., 2013; Stuart-Smith & Ota, 2014), but also on language attitude and linguistic stereotyping (Lippi-Green, 2012), which is particularly relevant to minority and minoritised languages.

Research has been done into the impact of television on children's cognitive development and, more specifically, language acquisition (e.g. Christakis, 2009; Christakis et al., 2018; Krcmar, 2014; Krcmar et al., 2007; Linebarger & Walker, 2005). The first five years of a child's life are referred to as the 'critical period' (Penfield & Roberts, 1959) in language acquisition, after which it becomes much harder to learn the language. Hence, this period is crucial in terms of language acquisition. Children start watching television in this 'critical period' and indeed a lot of content aims at pre-schoolers. A considerable amount of the language output some children are exposed to originates from the programmes they watch. Studying to what extent this impacts their language acquisition, particularly in smaller minoritized language areas is therefore important. It has been shown that toddlers, whose vocabulary starts to grow significantly at the age of three, can learn new words by merely watching audiovisual content, particularly when accompanied by a co-viewing parent (e.g. Krcmar et al., 2007). However, other research shows that three-year-olds can learn new words by watching audiovisual content unsupervised as well (e.g. Krcmar, 2014; Roseberry et al., 2009).

The face-to-face interaction Labov referred to is imitated in some children's programmes with a narrator interacting with the child audience asking simple questions and pretending to hear their answer. This answer is then repeated and the viewers are usually praised for giving the right answer. Moreover, children ideally also watch television with a co-viewing adult interacting with them while they watch the show. Some children's programmes even try to teach the viewers words and expressions. In the American animation series *Dora the explorer*, for example, the main character speaks English, but introduces several Spanish words and expressions in each episode asking the viewers to repeat those after her and rehearsing them throughout the episode (e.g. «Argentinians speak Spanish. When we need to go up, we say 'arriba'. Say: 'arriba'!»). In the Dutch version, interestingly, the Spanish vocabulary was replaced by English vocabulary. Not only can children's media affect language acquisition, it also affects their language attitude towards language varieties including their own. In this regard, the impact of dubbed television on children's language should also be studied.



## 6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

There is a wide range of media available through different platforms and the linguistic output children are exposed to varies greatly. Undoubtedly, there are advantages to importing media, as it can broaden a child's horizon. Ethnic diversity, for instance, particularly in the past, was better reflected in imported audiovisual content. A 2017 study (Götz et al., 2018, p.64) revealed children's programmes from the UK and the USA featured the most black main characters, while Germany and Belgium had the highest percentage of Caucasian main characters. Children's media not only have to become more inclusive and diverse, but also linguistically diverse. Translations, however, rarely reflect the linguistic diversity that is part of the audience's everyday life. Since local productions and co-productions better reflect linguistic diversity, it is important to invest in local content to counterbalance the influx of imported dubbed programmes. Children's media play a role in helping children to further develop their language skills. They also benefit greatly from hearing more linguistic diversity in locally produced television programmes and imported ones, in this way they can foster an openness towards other varieties. Speakers of a majority or dominant variety will, as a result, come into contact with other varieties and realise their variety is not the only one. This linguistic normalisation is important for them too, otherwise they will continue to consider other languages and language varieties *exotic*. They may even gain a passive knowledge of those. The language attitude of speakers of minority and minoritized languages will improve when they notice their language is used by their role models and favourite characters on television. It can help them to become confident language users.

The EU's Audiovisual Media Services Directive has been updated and still promotes the circulation of European works, but also cultural and linguistic diversity. Unfortunately, the role audiovisual translation plays in this regard is underestimated. As Umberto Eco put it, "the language of Europe is translation». Still, few questions seem to be raised at EU level about the language or national language variety used in translations. Moreover, the audio language or subtitle settings in audiovisual media should not be limited to the official national languages. Multilingualism within Europe can be invigorated by offering other language (varieties) across all European households. Linguistic diversity also exists within the same language area, certainly in the pluricentric language areas with their national varieties. Many languages in Europe are pluricentric languages with several non-dominant national varieties such as Austrian-German or Belgian-Dutch. For speakers of the dominant variety (e.g. German-German, Netherlandic-Dutch), it is important that they too are aware



of the linguistic diversity within their language area. A considerable part of the (audiovisual) fiction in smaller and medium-sized language areas is imported and often also translated. Most European countries rely on imported audiovisual content that needs to be localised into their own languages. Nonetheless, local language policies and preferences, for example, in terms of the linguistic standard used needs to be considered and may have to be regulated as well with quota. In this way, content can be made accessible to a wide range of audiences with different linguistic preferences and special needs.

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