

# Investigating the subtitles in *Good Bye Lenin*: Cultural and linguistic challenges

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The present paper deals with questions relating to the role of audiovisual translation as a cultural mediator. In Greece a common method used in film productions is subtitling which could be easily considered as a method of foreignization while at the same time the subtitle relies on localization and semiotic adequacy. So, in this case the subtitle functions as a canal of communication between the two different cultures offering the target audience the opportunity to get in touch with cultural and linguistic elements of the source culture. On the other hand, due to technical problems, as for example the maximum number of characters used in subtitles, this communication may be jeopardised. In this sense, we will use as a corpus the movie *Good Bye, Lenin!* as it provides intra-cultural and intra-linguistic features. The aim is to investigate how this influence can be distinguished through the subtitling process. Does the subtitler achieve to reflect the diversity of Eastern Germans and their language use? Could the subtitler function as well as a cultural mediator? The survey research and the qualitative method are followed in order to lighten up semiotic, linguistic and cultural features within the subtitling process as a mediator. Concrete questionnaires were distributed to Greek native speakers with no knowledge of the German language as a tool to measure the degree of historical background knowledge, the awareness of German culture and as well to reflect on the cause effect relation (that means, how crucial historical events contributed to the structure of modern German society). The outcomes confirm the weakness of the subtitles to distinguish between cultural and linguistic differences.

Key words: *subtitling, audiovisual translation, film, culture, language*

## 1 Introduction

In the present paper, the focus is on the role of subtitles as a cultural mediator. For a start, according to many theoreticians, subtitling does not even form part of

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translation studies, not only because they cannot accept the translation from an oral to a written text but also because they consider that there are a lot of restrictions concerning subtitles. But this is also a fact in translation. However, in the last twenty years subtitling forms an integral part of translation studies.

Audiovisual translation (AVT) is a particular branch of translation covering fields such as subtitling, dubbing and voice-over. The main concern here is not only the equivalence between the linguistic elements of the source and the target language, but also the equality between the verbal and non-verbal elements of the original work and the translated one.

According to many scholars, subtitling is considered to be the part of AVT where the translator might have to face the majority of constraints. Gottlieb (1992), influenced by Jacobson's classification of texts, proceeded into the classification of subtitles. As a result, the main groups are: a. intralingual subtitles (also called *vertical subtitles*) as they change perceptive modality (spoken text is converted into written text without any change); b. interlingual subtitles (or diagonal type of subtitles) which change both perceptive modality and language; c. open or non-optional represented subtitles which are integral physical part of a film or TV programme; closed or optional subtitles which are represented in form of teletext. Gottlieb (1992) refers to formal, or quantitative, and textual, or qualitative, constraints on subtitling; the formal constraints are imposed on the subtitles by the visual context of the film, and the textual constraints have to do with space and time as a technical restriction.

### **1.1 Subtitling as a Cultural Mediator**

It is a fact that translation deals with culture and its many aspects since often it plays the role of a cultural mediator. According to Samovar *et al.* (2007: 168) the link between language and culture is evident because language is the primary means of instructing members of a society in culturally acceptable practices and behaviours for social interaction, in the appropriate relationships to the physical environment, and to the sensed but unseen supernatural.

As part of the definition of culture, language and all its cultural elements can be seen as a challenge in translation. Furthermore translation constitutes a means for communication and it also bridges the understanding among cultures. Faiq (2007) recognizes, every source text is “a unique union between form and content (manner and matter) [...] that is embedded in a specific cultural context” (Faiq 2007:1). It is considerable that translation deals with language which forms an

integral part of culture and is culturally produced (Ramiere, 2006).

Concerning AVT, there is unfortunately often no space for literal translation. In this sense the loss of culture and language is inevitable. Translating culture in general, including its material and non-material aspects, involves acknowledging the goal of translation first. *Foreignization*, which includes transferring cultural elements from the source language directly to the target language, is a successful way of maintaining an element of foreignness. Through footnotes, or what Carbonell calls “Orientalist footnotes” (2004: 31), the translator attempts to clarify, balance or even soften situations and terms that may be misunderstood by the target audience. According to Nida, a translator should possess “cultural awareness” with regards to the target audience in order to transfer the meaning adequately (Venuti 2004:113). Moreover, Venuti explains that Nida’s strategy reduces the linguistic and cultural differences to a shared referent understood by the target audience. Nida is replacing foreign source culture elements with target culture elements. In other words, this can be defined as *localization*.

In AVT the translator goes through a process of adaptation meaning that he reproduces “a text for a new readership while maintaining some form of equivalence between source and target texts” (Bastin 2009:3). Adaptation, often seen as “distortion, falsification” and “censorship”, involves “the need for foreign texts to be adapted to the tastes and habits of the target culture” (ibd.) by deleting some parts of the source culture in order to make it familiar to the target audience.

When talking about the translation of cultural references, or what Ramiere (2006<sup>2</sup>) calls “culturespecific item(s)” (CSI), there is a large repertoire of available strategies. Pedersen (2007:31) classifies cultural references in: “monocultural ECRs (extra-linguistic cultural references)” and “transcultural ECRs”. Monocultural ECRs are cultural references known to the source language audience, but hardly known to the target language audience. Transcultural ECRs refer to cultural references which are known to both audiences. According to Pedersen, the techniques used by the subtitler to intervene when translating monocultural references are *specification*, *generalization* or *direct translation*. However, the quality of subtitles “has to be measured against what the subtitlers decide to translate as well as what they decide not to translate” (Bogucki 2004<sup>3</sup>). Bassnett (2002:56) mentions that there is almost always a “loss” in translation,

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.jostrans.org/issue06/art\\_ramiere.php?fbclid=IwAR3WXCGzevRDWOqFXJm7U7ry5PknDfovJ2SazPKLI9Ik5F769IIOUZMz7Dw](https://www.jostrans.org/issue06/art_ramiere.php?fbclid=IwAR3WXCGzevRDWOqFXJm7U7ry5PknDfovJ2SazPKLI9Ik5F769IIOUZMz7Dw)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.jostrans.org/issue01/art\\_bogucki\\_en.php](https://www.jostrans.org/issue01/art_bogucki_en.php).

which does not mean a complete loss in AVT since the image on the screen remains the same and therefore preserves part of the meaning.

## **2 The film**

### ***2.1 The historical background of the film Good Bye, Lenin!***

The film *Good Bye, Lenin!* is set in East Germany around the time of the collapse of the Berlin Wall. The film provides a fleeting glimpse into one of the major events in modern European history, touching many important political and social issues.

At the end of the World War II the allied countries signed ‘the Potsdam Treaty’, which defined the new borders of Germany. Berlin became increasingly divided between the Soviet influenced Eastern part, and the British, US and French influenced Western part. In 1961, the Berlin Wall separated East Germany (the German Democratic Republic, GDR) from West Germany (Federal Republic of Germany, FRG). The GDR controlled people’s lives by preaching the rule of socialism. Between the two Germanies, families and friends were cut off, with many having little or no contact with each other for decades.

The historical context of the movie is the leading part in the plot and gives an overview of the political system of that time and mainly stresses on struggles of people living in the GDR before and after the fall of Berlin Wall, and how the reunification of East and West Germany affected the lives of people in that nation such as changes in their lifestyle, disregarding the East. The most important theme is the constant concurrence between the old GDR and the Reunited Germany.

### ***2.2 The plot***

In the film *Good Bye, Lenin!*, Christiane Kerner—the mother of Alexander and Ariane—falls into a coma after witnessing her son at an anti-government rally, herself a strong advocate of Socialism and a political activist. Soon after Christiane falls into coma, the Berlin Wall is taken down. A wave of change swept over East Germany with a new social, political, and economic landscape. The residents in East Germany were suddenly overwhelmed with new rights, such as freedom of speech and movement. The media were no longer censored nor controlled by the state. Secret police no longer roamed the streets and political prisoners were not taken any more.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the central character Alex adopts and represents the westernized values, although he makes history and time stand still, so he can protect his ill mother from the times political upheaval. We first meet the Kerner family in 1989 on the eve of the German Democratic Republic's 40th anniversary. During the eight months she is unconscious, political events gather speed, the Berlin Wall is knocked down, the East German government is dismantled and capitalism invades from the West. Because of her fragile condition Alex and Ariane decide to keep all the political and social changes away from their mother, in order to protect her from a shock, as advised by the doctors. The fake reality created mainly by Alex embodied the ideal that some parts of Germany truly dreams of achieving.

The historical context and the cultural features of the film *Good Bye, Lenin!* are the dominant part of the plot. The present research aims to see if it offers viewers, with or without knowledge of German language, this particular political era and Germany's history and transformation, through subtitles an insight into how life was back then and how life changed so dramatically. Besides, this genre seems interesting concerning the effectiveness or weakness if subtitling.

### 3 The survey

The survey was carried out in December 2016 at the Department of Business Administration of the Technological Educational Institute of Epirus in Igoumenitsa, Greece. 105 questionnaires were distributed to students of the department, who had no previous knowledge of German language. The questionnaire included both, open and closed questions to be answered before, during and after watching the film.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	42	40	40	40
Female	63	60	60	100
Total	105	100	100	

Table 1. Gender

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
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18-25	42	40	40	40
26-35	42	60	60	80
>35	21	20	20	100
Total	105	100	100	

Table 2. Age

Before the film, the interviewees were asked what kind of connotation the film's title *Good Bye, Lenin!* evoked. Answers like “weakening of the Soviet Union”, “collapse of the existing socialism and communist regime in Eastern and Western Europe”, “reunification of Germany”, “Exodus”, “death”, “change”, or “the end of communism and Lenin's sovereignty” were given concerning this question. 40% of the students questioned evaluated their historical and encyclopedic knowledge concerning Germany as medium, while the same percentage evaluated as “very good” and “good”. Furthermore 70% of the interviewees declared that they had seen documentaries and films about German history.

A2: How do you evaluate your historical knowledge concerning the consequences of World War II?	N	%
Excellent	21	20%
Very good	21	20%
Good	21	20%
Medium	42	40%
Total	105	100%

Table 3. Historical Knowledge

A3: Have you ever watched a movie or documentary concerning the history of postwar Germany?	N	%
Yes	70	67%
No	35	23%
Total	105	100%

Table 4. Knowledge through movies and documentaries

At the same time, the majority (67%) is convinced that subtitles do not provide adequate information when it comes to historical content.

A3: Do you believe that in the case of a movie with historical content the subtitle provides adequate information?	N	%
Yes	35	23%
No	70	67%
Total	105	100%

Table 5. The role of the subtitle

The question if subtitles could function as a cultural mediator was answered 83% positive.

A3: Do you believe that subtitles could function as a cultural mediator?	N	%
Yes	87	83%
No	18	17%
Total	105	100%

Table 6. The subtitle as a cultural mediator

In the second part of the questionnaire open and closed questions had to be answered while watching the film. The first question was on the translation of the term *Republikflucht* in the subtitles. The term *Republikflucht* was only used by authorities in Eastern Germany to describe the process of leaving the GDR for a life in West Germany or any other Western (non-Warsaw Pact) country. This could be achieved before the Berlin Wall was erected (13/08/1961) as well as through the dangerous attempt to cross the Iron Curtain (e. g. the Berlin Wall, the Inner German border, or the Western border of another country of the Eastern Bloc), or via obtaining a temporary exit visas and subsequently not returning, from 1961 to 1989.

Concerning the question what *Republikflucht*<sup>4</sup> (Διαφυγή από τη Δημοκρατία ‘Republic escape’) means, there were various answers:

1. Escape from GDR?
2. Escape from socialism
3. Escape from Eastern to Western Germany
4. Somebody is contrary to the rules of a statutory democracy and follows another political mainstream

The subtitle shows a case of literal translation, as the term does not exist in Greek. In this sense the subtitler follows the process of foreignization in order to maintain the dynamic of the expression and to bring the German culture closer to the target culture, although the equivalence is not functional in the target language. When it comes to AVT, footnotes cannot be used. The exemplary answers show that the subtitle could not guarantee the absolute understanding.

The question “In the subtitles often appear the terms “Δυτικός” and “Δύση” (western-West, der Wessi/der Westen). Where do they refer to?” was answered

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<sup>4</sup> The term *Republikflucht* was subtitled in Greek as Διαφυγή από τη Δημοκρατία ‘escape from the Republic’.



by 20% that the term “western” means “Western Europe”.

B6: In the subtitles often appear the terms «Δυτικός» and «Δύση» (western-West, der Wessi/der Westen). Where do they refer?	N	%
Western culture	0	0%
Western Europe	21	20%
Western Germany	84	80%
None of the above	0	0%
Total	105	100%

Table 7: Connotation of the terms “Wessi/derWesten”

Concerning the question on the absence of translations in the case of newspaper headings, etc., the missing subtitles of newspaper headings do not seem to bother more than half of the interviewees.

B4: In many scenes the director chooses a close-up on newspaper headings, which are not translated in the target language. Do you believe, that the absence of subtitles bothers significantly the understanding	N	%
Yes	42	40%
No	63	60%
Total	105	100%

Table 8: Not translated newspaper headings

With reference to the video sequence (00:59'), where we see a conversation between different people, the interviewees were asked about the reason why Alex interrupts Rainer while talking in front of his mother. The majority did not understand the real reason for the critical incident, which was that he had a West German accent. The potential reasons given were:

- He is probably afraid that Rainer’s real role, while being part of the free German pioneers, will be understood.
- He does not want him to say things, through which the mother could understand what really is going on outside. Alex has hidden the truth from her, even that he “converted” to the values of Western Germany.
- He does not want to reveal the collapse of the Eastern Germanys’ Regime to her.
- For him not to refer to things that happened during the eight months Christine was in coma, especially not to refer to Western Germany.

In the last phase of the survey, questions had to be answered after watching the film. The question on the importance of the picture concerning the historical and



political framework, resulted that 60% believed that the dynamic of the picture played a crucial role in understanding. Besides, 60% state that the subtitle finally did not contain adequate information referring to historical background.

B11: Do you believe that the picture played a subsidiary or crucial role towards understanding the historical and political framework?	N	%
Subsidiary	42	40%
Crucial	63	60%
Total	105	100%

Table 9: The role of the picture

B10: Do you believe that the subtitling of the particular film contained adequate information referring to historical background?	N	%
Yes	42	40%
No	63	60%
Total	105	100%

Table 10: Adequate information through subtitles

Interesting seem the answers concerning the question to name information they got through the subtitles referring the German Culture. Information associated with German culture and drawn by the subtitles were for example “Family”, “Friendship”, “Diligence”, “Organization”, “Western Germany is developing and progressing in contrast to Eastern Germany, where those changes are not easily to accept”, “Western Germany is closer to present political circumstances”, “and Eastern Germany was functioning under slow and old modes and rhythms”, “No accessibility to such information”.

#### 4 Conclusion

The survey aimed to lighten up semiotic, linguistic and cultural features within the subtitling process as a mediator. The questionnaires distributed tried to measure both, the role of the subtitle as a cultural mediator and the degree of historical background knowledge, the awareness of German culture, and as well to reflect on how crucial historical events contributed to the structure of modern German society. The survey outcomes confirm the weakness of the subtitles to distinguish between cultural and linguistic differences. Comparing the opinions before and after watching the film in reference to the role of the subtitles, it can be noticed that the adequacy of subtitles concerning the specific topic had been evaluated with 70% and 63%. The question asked before watching the film “if subtitles could be seen as cultural mediators” had been answered positive with 87%, while the question concerning the dialect use was rated with 0%. In this

sense, it is an absolute desideratum to research more on the role, function and dynamic of subtitling films, especially when it is the main way to have access to foreign cultures through films.

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## Appendix

### Questionnaire of the survey

#### Part A

A.1. What kind of connotation is evoked by the title of the movie Good Bye Lenin?

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.....

A.2. How do you evaluate your historical knowledge concerning the consequences of world war II?

- Excellent
- Very good
- Good
- Medium
- None

A.3. Have you ever watched a movie or documentary concerning the history of postwar Germany?

- Yes
- No

A.4. Do you believe that in the case of a movie with historical content the subtitle provides adequate information?

- Yes
- No

A.5. Do you believe that subtitles could function as a cultural mediator?

- Yes
- No

#### Part B

B.1. Define the term GDR;

.....

B.2. What does the term "Διαφυγή από τη Δημοκρατία" (Republikflucht/ desertion from the republic) mean?

.....

B.3. Do you receive historical information from the following picture?

- Yes
- No

If yes which information?

.....

.....

B.4. In many scenes the director chooses a close-up on newspaper headings, which are not translated in the target language. Do you believe, that the absence of subtitles bothers significantly the understanding?

- Yes
- No

B.5. In many scenes the director chooses a close-up on demonstration placards, which are not translated in the target language. Do you believe that the absence of subtitles bothers significantly the understanding?

- Yes
- No

B.6. In the subtitles often appear the terms "Δυτικός" and "Δύση" (western-West, der Wessi/der Westen). Where do they refer?

- |                 |                          |                   |                          |
|-----------------|--------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|
| Western culture | <input type="checkbox"/> | Western Germany   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Western Europe  | <input type="checkbox"/> | None of the above | <input type="checkbox"/> |

B.7. In the sequence 00:59' Alex interrupts Rainer. Which could be the reason for this?

.....  
.....

B.8. Did you notice any kind of dialect in the subtitles?

- Yes
- No

B.9. What do you perceive through the following picture?

.....  
.....

B.10. Do you believe that the subtitling of the particular film contained adequate information referring to historical background?

- Yes
- No

B.11. Do you believe that the picture played a subsidiary or crucial role towards understanding the historical and political framework?

- subsidiary
- crucial

B.12. Name information of German culture drawn by the subtitles:

.....  
.....