

**Andy Stauder**  
Universität Innsbruck

## Screen Translation: Quality through Transparency, Democratisation and Openness to Science?

---

### ABSTRACT

Screen translation is a field that historically has seldom explicitly addressed the issue of translation quality, be it in terms of translation studies or translation practice. This is mainly due to oligopolistic, non-transparent and non-democratic tendencies during the historical establishment of the sub-types of and practices in screen translation, i.e. socio-economic factors. This historical development has led to the neglect of key TQ factors: linguistics and linguistic skills. Recent tendencies towards more openness, transparency, and democratic principles, in part due to digitalisation, give reason to expect increased pressure to achieve high translation quality, as well as openness to translation studies, and a reassertion of scientific principles as far as translation studies itself is concerned.

**Keywords:** Translation quality; screen translation; linguistics; digitalisation; socio-economics; history of translation.

---

*Ignoranti quem portum petat nullus suus ventus est.*<sup>1</sup>

Seneca the Younger

### Status Quo

“Trillions of bytes of information at your fingertips.” No, this phrase has nothing to do with the digital information-related scandals of recent years. It is a quote from a newly released video game, called ‘Watchdogs’, which is in fact centred around the dangers of our electronics-dependant information society. The phrase

---

1| *To him who does not know what port he seeks no wind is his own.* Translation: A.S.

can be heard in one of the game's trailers (Ubisoft 2014). What makes the phrase interesting for the present paper is the quality of its translation into German. The German counterpart of the above phrase in the video is: 'Trillionen Bytes Information an der Fingerspitze.'

Let us take a closer linguistic look at this example. The first translation error here is the word *Trillionen*, which is a false friend in this case. The German equivalent of the (American) English trillion is *Billion*, as in German the so called *long scale* is used for names of large numbers, where every term ending in *-illion* denotes numbers 1,000,000 times larger than those denoted by the previous term ending in *-illion*, whereas anglophone countries predominantly use the *short scale*, where the factor is only 1,000. The next error is the word *Information*. This is a singular noun where the German convention for this uncountable noun is the plural form unless it really is a question of one single piece of information. The last error here is the phrase 'an der Fingerspitze'. This is a very literal rendering that does not really work in German. Granted, it does not have a concise equivalent in German, but still there are variants that can perform a sufficiently similar communicative function very well, e.g. 'auf Knopfdruck zur Verfügung' [available at the touch of a button].

So, in summary, this rendering consists of more errors than it does correct parts: in fact, it almost solely consists of errors. What is striking is the fact that this game is a product of one of the largest firms in *the* largest entertainment industry in the world<sup>2</sup>, which is also why I chose this example: film<sup>3</sup> is no longer the largest audiovisual medium and therefore also not the largest player in screen translation anymore. It is somewhat disheartening that such an enormous industry (or its localisation sub-industry) should be unable to supply its customers in foreign-language markets with translations that do justice to the vast amounts of creative energy that go into the storytelling of this complex interactive medium. Sadly, this is characteristic of the status quo of translation quality in multimedia products today. As I have shown in an earlier study (see Stauder 2013), in terms of translation – and not only screen translation, quality has mostly been taken for granted as long as such parameters as a nondescript and/or circular kind of translator competence (who assesses the assessors?) or experience (is it really impossible to do poor work for a long time?) were satisfied. This is true of translation studies as well as translation industry. Only few scholars have ever made translation quality or its definition the object of study, due to the complexity of the topic. This, however, means that a whole field has been working without

---

2| Already in 2011 the video game industry generated an estimated revenue of 65 billion USD worldwide (Reuters 2011), as opposed to the film industry at 35.9 billion USD in 2013 (Motion Picture Association of America 2013).

3| Film as a medium, however, exhibits the very same shortcomings in terms of translation quality, as I have shown elsewhere (see Stauder 2013).

a clear definition of quality, i.e. without a clear goal towards which to work: just as the sailors in the above motivational quote, who don't know where they are going: no wind can be favourable for them. As the title of this paper suggests, in the present context practically relevant quality determining factors of a socio-economic dimension are to be described, which have a significant bearing on translation quality, but which have been largely overlooked so far. These factors mainly explain why translation quality assessment based on such vague notions as the above, or total lack of quality assessment, has hardly ever been challenged so far. So, what is to be examined here is first and foremost how (screen) translation quality is influenced on a meta-level: what its necessary conditions are, or, more precisely, why they are missing.

## The Economics and History of Translation Quality

What can be observed with regard to screen translation is that a number of problematic phenomena in this field – strikingly those to do with artistic and linguistic considerations – are related to the (A) *economics* of this industry. The economic characteristics of this branch are in turn due to the (B) *history* of its development. But let us examine these two factors one at a time.

So, what are the (A) economic characteristics of screen translation? They are those of an oligopoly: there are only a small number of suppliers of certain commodities or services for a whole market. E.g. there are only about a dozen of major dubbing studios in Germany (see Erb/Meyer 2009), and quite in general, and not only in the German market, screen translation is “a small closed shop of figures who keep work very much to themselves” (Chiaro 2008). Oligopolies share (see Welker's Wikinomics 2014) several characteristics with pure monopolies, where there is only one supplier, even if in a monopoly they are more pronounced. The ones that are of interest in the present context are *non-transparency* and *lack of democratic principles*, and *inefficiency* resulting from this. Non-transparency and lack of democratic principles are inherent to private companies – if to a varying degree – as they have a vested interest in property rights and strategic action, both aimed at staying ahead of the competition – or preventing it altogether in the case of pure monopolies. And this already brings us to the second characteristic of interest here; minimisation or lack of competition, in which non-transparency and non-democratic forms of organisation are a factor, leads to the inefficiency of monopolies and oligopolies. This inefficiency is of a complex nature (see Sloman 2006: 172). Firstly, there is allocative inefficiency, because customers have to pay prices that are considerably higher than the production costs of what is provided, and through the high prices the monopolist can only supply to a smaller number of customers, which leads to less overall revenue. Also, through lowering the prices and reaching a broader customer base, in a monopoly situation he would

not be able to make up for what he would lose from the former high-price customers. I.e., the monopoly is, in terms of efficiency, disadvantageous both for the monopolist and the customers – this is the price that the monopolist pays for one thing only: not having to worry about competition.

Secondly, there is technical inefficiency (see Sloman 2006: 172), which is closely connected to what has just been said: not having to worry about competition makes companies' situations rather comfortable, with the following effect: "[...] the more comfortable the situation, the less may be the effort which is expended to improve it." (Sloman 2006: 172) This means that the lack of competitive pressure makes firms prone to not investing in innovation, working inefficiently, and not adopting new production techniques.

The second factor with a bearing on why screen translation is what it is nowadays is the (B) history of how the various types of audiovisual translation and the respective companies developed and established themselves. What can be observed here is that, as with monopolies in terms of firms, in terms of production techniques themselves there is a similar phenomenon, which is closely connected with the formation of monopolies and oligopolies. These economic situations form mostly because of an advantage – often of technological nature – that tips the competitive balance in favour of one competitor. With production techniques it is very similar: during an initial stage, in which several techniques – and of course the firms supporting them – compete with each other, an advantage that is seemingly minute can tip the balance and lead to one technique's becoming the standard, and often the company's backing it becoming a monopolist, or part of an oligopoly if there are several backers of the same technique. In this process, the technique with the small advantage can use this to expand its impact and thus decrease the availability of products made using other techniques, thus again strengthening its own position: a self-reinforcing process leading to the virtual or complete disappearance of all other competing techniques or formats. In social sciences, this process based on the disproportionate effect that one small factor can have is called path dependence (for a more detailed definition see Arrow 2000). It can lead to a final locked-in state in which a technique has become the standard and is virtually impossible to challenge, whether there might be newer, better alternatives or not. Blinn (2008) describes this situation for the dubbing standard in the German market. As we shall see, widespread forms of screen translation (dubbing, subtitling, and voice-over translation, to name the most prominent ones) have established themselves in this way as the respective standards in their countries or language areas – with quality falling by the wayside over time.

Let us now have a closer look at the economics and history of the three major types of screen translation and how they interconnect, in order to determine how they affect theoretical and practical interest in translation quality. At first, let

us look at the issues brought about by (A) monopolistic/oligopolistic economic situations, i.e. lack of transparency and democratic principles, which lead to inefficiency. Of course, all types of screen translation have their own history, characteristics, and established themselves in different ways, which explains why they also differ considerably in terms of transparency and democratic characteristics. But how can we distinguish between transparency and democratic characteristics in this context? Of course, there is a certain area of overlap, but let us try to define the two for the present purpose. Transparency means the possibility for those working in a screen translation studio, and for those outside the translating operation, i.e. viewers, authorities, clients etc., to understand how the work is carried out, and, in another sense, also the possibility of viewers to understand *that* it is carried out, i.e. the visibility of the service. Democratic principles on the other hand mean the possibility for those inside and outside of the operation to influence the service, i.e. the possibility for contributors to influence the final product and for viewers to communicate and achieve changes of what they do not like.

How can such economic situations affect quality considerations in connection with the individual types of audiovisual translation: (a) dubbing, (b) voice-over translation, and (c) subtitling? The least transparent and democratic type of screen translation in this sense is (a) dubbing. Transparency is a factor that is mainly dependent on the use that a type of translation makes of the channels of an audiovisual medium. There are several such channels that can be distinguished: an audio channel (i.e. the audio track of an AV medium, comprising dialogue, music, and noises), a visual channel (i.e. everything that can be seen in the picture itself, i.e. scenery and actors, but also written signs on walls etc.), and a text channel (i.e. additional written information that does not belong to the picture itself, such as subtitles, surtitles, intertitles etc., i.e. a dedicated, genuinely written channel). For translation purposes dubbing makes use of the audio channel, to the effect that all spoken information from the source text is lost. This means that there is very little that enables an average user to tell what the original text might have been like, only visual information such as the lip movements of the actors – off-camera commentary is lost altogether. This also means a very low visibility of the service – many viewers are unaware (if only temporarily) that they are watching something rendered in a different language.

In terms of democratic characteristics, what is very important is the *person-in-charge factor*. Most types of audiovisual translation have one thing in common: a person that has the greatest amount of influence on the final product, who is mostly situated at the very last stage of the production process. In the case of dubbing this person in charge is the dubbing director. After a rough translation has been made by others, he or she adapts the text to meet the requirements of lip-sync and whatever artistic perception he or she has of the original: and not least importantly, to the requirements of the clients, i.e. film studios and distributors.

.....

This adaption is for a substantial part done on the fly while working with the voice actors. This means that it is almost solely this person that is responsible for the final product, as far as language is concerned. I.e. the person-in-charge factor is very high in the case of dubbing. The invisibility of the service, caused by the aforementioned non-transparency as well as by the seclusiveness of the localisation studios, leads to viewers not knowing that they are unhappy about a translation, but rather about the product as a whole, and to the virtual impossibility of changing the part of the product that they are actually unhappy about: the translation.

The next, somewhat more transparent and democratic type of translation is (b) voice-over translation. Here the audio channel of the medium is used as well for translation, however in a different way. In this case the original spoken dialogue and off-camera commentary are still audible in the background, at a lowered volume. This makes this type of translation necessarily more transparent – viewers are constantly (if only potentially) aware, that there is an original in a different language, and some characteristics of the original, such as the sound of the actors' voices are transported as well. However, this only makes viewers aware that they are watching a translation, but it does not enable them – or only to a small extent – to actually compare the original with the translation, because the translation covers most of the original with the voice actors' dialogue of the translation. So, voice-over translation is more transparent than dubbing, but still of rather limited transparency.

In terms of democratic characteristics, too, higher levels can be observed. Voice-over translation spreads the workload and responsibility in connection with a translation more evenly on those involved (see Szarkowska 2009). There is a translator who makes a first draft of the translation, an editor who adapts passages to match their originals in length when spoken, and a voice actor, who reads this translation (in an emotionally rather subdued way) and can also propose changes. It is obvious that the editor has the most responsibility here and could be called the person in charge for this type of translation; however, the role is not as strong as that of the dubbing director (even if only the terms alone are considered: editor vs. director). Also, the higher transparency level making viewers more aware of the fact that what they watch are translations leads to their knowing that it may be the translation that they feel unhappy about – not the original content, and enables them to voice such concerns.

There is one last major type of audiovisual translation to be discussed here: (c) subtitling. It is the most transparent and democratic in the present context. Its transparency is quite evident: it makes use only of the (genuinely) written channel of audiovisual media, as it translates by superimposing text lines on the image. This enables users to hear the original at all times – and to be aware of the translation being a translation – i.e. the service is very visible. In terms of democratic

characteristics, the distribution of responsibility in subtitling firms differs with their size (see Díaz Cintas 2007: 35). While in smaller firms the translating, spotting, i.e. the setting of start and stop times of the individual subtitles, and the adapting of the subtitles to the requirements of the medium are often performed by one and the same person, in larger firms these are often separate steps performed by different people. So, here we have similar levels as in the case of dubbing in smaller subtitling firms and similar ones as with voice-over translation in larger subtitling operations, however the transparency factor is considerable in both cases.

So, we have seen the first of the two major socio-economic factors that interfere with translation quality (in so far as they prevent serious interest in translation quality): (A) monopolistic/oligopolistic economic situations and the lack of transparency and democratic characteristics inherent to them. The second factor that has been mentioned – (B) path dependence – which is more of a historical consideration, is of similarly problematic significance to the perceived relevance of translation quality in theory and practice, because it led to the aforementioned quasi-monopolistic situations to begin with.

Let us take a brief look at this (B) second factor as well. Path-dependence, in connection with the three types of audiovisual translation works in a very similar fashion in all three cases that are to be considered here. Of course they all of them have their own sets of circumstances which eventually contributed to their establishment as the standard in their respective geographic area; in the case of dubbing it was the already existing popularity of foreign language versions that contributed to a wide acceptance of dubbed versions, especially in rural areas (see Blinn 2008). Foreign-language versions meant that the same film was filmed again with actors speaking in a different language. In the case of voice-over translation, from the 1960s, in Russia, it was the practice of simultaneous interpreting of films at closed-door film screenings held by the State Committee for Cinematography and later at film festivals (see Franco/Matamala/Orero: 47f.) that created a supply of film translations, whereas in Poland it presumably started out as an alternative to the badly legible cinema subtitles on the smaller TV screens (see Szarkowska 2009). As far as subtitles are concerned, they developed rather naturally from the predecessor technique of intertitles (see Ivarsson 2004). It is often said and hypothesised that subtitles developed due to their low cost (see also *ib.*); however, due to the complicated technical nature of bringing subtitles onto physical film itself before the advent of digital filming, this was only true for very small numbers of copies between 10 (*ib.*) and 33 pieces (see Blinn 2008: 22), which makes it likely to only have been an initial consideration.

What all three types have in common is the fact that they became the standard in their areas because they got the upper hand in terms of availability due to a *triggering event* in terms of path dependence, such as the low cost for small numbers of copies in the case of subtitles, which later was practically irrelevant.

.....

This increased supply of a certain type of translation gradually accustomed viewers to exactly this type so that they inadvertently “learned” to live with its peculiarities, such as never-perfect lip-sync with dubbing, disturbing background dialogue with voice-over, or having to read and watch at the same time with subtitling. This in turn increased the demand for translations of the respective type – a positive feedback loop that led to path dependence – and, together with the small number of institutions technically capable of producing audiovisual translations, to the rigid, inefficient, non-transparent, non-democratic characteristics of the business, which make quality a secondary concern – if to varying degree depending on the type of translation.

## Towards Necessary Conditions of Translation Quality

What we have seen so far begs the question how things can be improved. The most obvious answer is to reduce the impact of the two major socio-economic phenomena which are at the heart of the described shortcomings: in terms of economics on the one hand: monopolistic/oligopolistic economic situations; on the other hand, in terms of history: path dependence in connection with the various forms of screen translation – both closely interconnected, as we have seen. The difficult part is, however, how the necessary conditions of translation quality that we have identified: more transparency, democratic structures, and openness to new insights and knowledge, can be achieved in audiovisual translation, both theoretically and practically.

The crucial point here is, in both cases, professionalism. Professionalism means doing work well, with all ethically justifiable means. In terms of science this means making use of modern methodologies and mainly technical, more precisely digital, tools that help to manage the inexpressibly vast complexity of language – only in this way can quantifiable, reliable results be achieved which will be accepted by the industry as well. As far as the latter is concerned, making use of all ethically justifiable means includes being open-minded and being open to science – because, what is science? The intense study of an object or field in all its details and intricacies – explaining how something works, and how it does not! In terms of screen translation practice, openness to science as a key factor of professionalism is of manifold significance. Firstly, relevant training based on scientific insights is a considerable desideratum, and in connection with language professions “relevant” means “linguistic training”. Most people-in-charge in screen translation studios, however, have artistic training only, which is important, too, but not sufficient. In this context, science, for example, has to offer high-speed language learning techniques based on intercomprehension (see Ustaszewski 2014), i.e. learning or improving languages systematically, based on those one already knows. This approach also underlines the general importance

of *learning* how to learn languages: a skill that might be a significant asset to, e.g., dubbing directors. Secondly, scientific study can offer practically relevant definitions of quality, such as the translation quality model based on a fundamental theory of language described by Stauder (see 2013). This, in a nutshell, defines translation quality as the constancy of information weighting between source and target text, which is achieved by many complex operations, which are also described in detail. Thirdly, science offers tools for the control and assessment of quality, e.g. translation memory systems, which help improving the consistency of translations, which is one important aspect of translation quality; such systems, however, are adopted only slowly by screen translation. Also, there is a theoretical model for a computer program capable of assessing all dimensions of translation quality, based on fundamental linguistic research, also described in Stauder (2013), which incorporates a host of preexisting linguistic findings, which have only never been combined so far.

It is true that screen translation companies are beginning to understand the importance of more professionalism. This is due to the ongoing digitalisation of our world – media have become digital, and, at the same time, more democratic: the availability of different types of translation, such as subtitles on DVD and its successor formats, has seen a marked increase in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century; then there are fan-subtitles that are freely available for a host of films and TV series; also, there are voice-over versions available on the internet, fan-made or professional alike; filmmaking and audiovisual equipment for amateurs has become much more affordable and available; social media have changed the way that large film firms receive feedback from their audiences; the list goes on. In summary, these developments seem to dissolve the locked-in paths that have made screen translation oligopolies possible, i.e. the pressure to produce better quality is rising due to socio-economic factors. One of these factors is also the pressure to produce faster and in greater volume than before the advent of digital technologies, which also increases competition among the few players (see e.g. Erb/Mayer 2009). This, however, shows us the other side of the coin: increased pressure can also be detrimental to quality – if production techniques are not adapted to this new situation. It is not impossible to process larger volumes in a shorter time while also increasing, or at least maintaining, quality. This shows precisely the role that the socio-economic factors identified in this paper play: increased quality (and quantity!) through more transparency, democratisation, and openness to what translation studies – especially as a sub-discipline of linguistics – has to say.

So, the agendas are quite clear-cut: science is to offer more practically relevant research; the industry is to display more openness towards science, which implies transparency and democratisation. The keystone promising to unite the two into a productive arch and resolve the inefficient current situation is certainly technology – ironically, the very thing that brought about this situation.

## References

- Arrow, Kenneth J. (2000). „Increasing Returns: Historiographic Issues and Path Dependence.” In: *European Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 7/2. pp. 171–180. (Quoted in Blinn 2008).
- Blinn, Miika (2008). „The Dubbing Standard: Its History and Efficiency. Implications for Film Distributors in the German Film Market”. In: *Dynamics of Institutions and Markets in Europe researchers' network, working papers on intellectual property rights* no. 57. London.
- Chiaro, Delia (2008). „Issues of Quality in Screen Translation: Problems and Solutions”. In: Chiaro, D./ Heiss, Ch./ Bucaria, Ch. [eds.]. *Between Text and Image. Updating Research in Screen Translation*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia. pp. 241–256.
- Díaz Cintas, Jorge (2007). *Audiovisual Translation: Subtitling*. Manchester.
- Erb, Sebastian/ Meyer, Florian (2009). „Film-Synchronisation. Der Kampf um die Krümel”. In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (online). <<http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/medien/film-synchronisation-der-kampf-um-die-kruemel-1829457-p3.html>>; accessed on 4 June 2014.
- Franco, Eliana/ Matamala, Anna/ Orero, Pilar (2010). *Voice-over Translation: An Overview*. Berne.
- Ivarsson, Jan (2004). „A Short Technical History of Subtitles in Europe”. Article on <<http://www.transedit.se/history.htm>>; accessed on 24 June 2014.
- Motion Picture Association of America (2013). *Theatrical Market Statistics 2013*.
- Reuters (2011). „Factbox: A look at the \$65 billion video games industry”. <<http://uk.reuters.com/article/2011/06/06/us-videogames-factbox-idUKTRE75552I20110606>>; accessed on 20 May 2014.
- Seneca, Lucius A. *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*. VIII, LXXI, 3.
- Slovan, John (2006). *Economics*. Pearson Education.
- Stauder, Andy (2013). *A Linguistic Framework for Computer-aided Quality Assurance in Screen Translation, Containing a Brief Theory of Language and Translation Going Beyond Constructivism*. Dissertation. Innsbruck.
- Szarkowska, Agnieszka (2009). „The Audiovisual Landscape in Poland at the Dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”. In: Golubović, B./ Goldstein, A. [eds.]. *Foreign Language Movies: Dubbing Vs. Subtitling*. Hamburg. pp. 185–201.
- Ubisoft (2014). Official story trailer of the Videogame “Watchdogs”. Time index: 1’03”. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XGZ1fwKcEmc>>; accessed on 20 May 2014.
- Ustaszewski, Michael (2014, forthcoming). *Towards a Methodology for Intercomprehension-Based Language Instruction in Translator Training*. Dissertation. Innsbruck.
- Welker’s Wikinomics (2014). Wiki entry “Oligopoly and Efficiency”. <<http://welkerswikinomics.wikifoundry.com/page/Oligopoly+and+Efficiency>>; accessed on 4 June 2014.