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Annio I - Numero 1
In collaborazione con
la Scuola Superiore per Mediatori Linguistici di Pisa

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Respeaking at BBC

Abstract

Respeaking is a very recent technique that is more and more used by broadcasters to produce real-time subtitles of their live programmes. However, little is known about respeaking, both theoretically and professionally. What is exactly meant by respeaking? How does it work? Why is it used? Which competences has a respeaker to possess? After a brief description of respeaking, of its origins, and of its intended end users, the present article will try and give an answer to all the above-mentioned questions, thus offering a hopefully extensive and exhaustive overview of respeaking. In particular, the experience of the BBC will be used as a reference, since it is the broadcaster that more extensively makes use of respeaking for live subtitling purposes. Finally, some pieces of BBC news subtitled live will be analysed from different angles, so as to offer a concrete example of how respeakers process the English language while subtitling in real time for the deaf and the hard-of-hearing.

1. Introduction

Before we discuss respeaking, it is necessary to mention the concept of speech recognition, the main technology on which respeaking is based. Any speech recognition software, thanks to a complex series of syntactical, lexical, phonetic-phonological and morphological patterns, is able to process a vocal input. The text, be it a written text read aloud or an impromptu speech, is spoken through a microphone, recognized by the software programme and transformed into written text. The output, as it will be clearer later, can be viewed on many different media types and in a variety of different formats according to target users and their needs. Speech recognition is used in many areas, both professional and personal. The technology was initially developed to help professionals working in fields like politics, medicine, law and others, in order to provide them with a new instrument that could help them to transcribe an orally produced text. This new technology is especially useful when dealing with specific time constraints or when, due to given professional needs, hands cannot be used for conventional typing or handwriting. Thanks to the latest spread of personal computers with very fast processing units at a reasonable price, speech recognition is now also used by home users to write emails or any sort of document, and by an increasing number of disabled people who otherwise would find it difficult or impossible to use any other input device. Recently, respeaking was also adopted by various TV companies, both private and public, in order to subtitle in real time their live programmes and provide greater accessibility to their deaf and hard-of-hearing audience. Thanks to a well-established tradition of accessibility rights, the United Kingdom is, to date, the leading country in real time subtitling. Both the state company BBC and increasingly private cable and satellite TV channels make use of this new technique to make their live shows more accessible.
The great success of BBC as a forerunner in this field has convinced other broadcasting companies all around the world to introduce real-time subtitling for all types of live programmes. At the moment being, many companies have already adopted respeaking for some of their main programmes and others are trying to train their personnel to work with subtitles. Moreover, BBC is, both qualitatively and quantitatively, the best example of live subtitling through respeaking. For these reasons, the following pages will describe respeaking considering the BBC experience, while trying and identify all the features that are specific to the English language that cannot be considered in a wider multilingual approach.

2. Definition

As for the theory of translation, respeaking pertains to the domain of audiovisual translation. As all other techniques, it is characterized by two main aspects:

- the process: Situational context where translation takes place, including all the operating and psycho-cognitive strategies of the translator;

- the product: the final result of the translation process, i.e. the target text received by the audience.

Considering the above statement and the taxonomy proposed by Gottlieb (2005), respeaking, as a process, can be described as a simultaneous intra-linguistic (or inter-linguistic) and isosemiotic form of translation belonging to the field of inspirational translation subcategory, since its relationship with the source text is varying from tradition to tradition. Making reference to a sub-taxonomy used by Roman Jakobson (1959), Gottlieb explains that the term ‘inter-/intra-linguistic’, when referred to translation, describes the relationship between the source and the target language of the translated text. As mentioned before, TV respeaking was introduced to help deaf and hard-of-hearing people to access national programmes like TV shows, the news, parliamentary sessions, and all sorts of live events. That is why it is mainly an intra-linguistic process, meaning in the same language as the source text. When using the term isosemiotic, the author simply means that respeaking implies the use of the same semiotic channels of production as the original text, the oral channel. The third term used to describe respeaking, ‘simultaneous’, as in simultaneous interpreting, defines the production of the source text and the respeaking process as two events occurring at the same time. This is the main difference between respeaking and traditional subtitling, that is the one of pre-recorded programmes or movies for deaf people. When considering respeaking as a final product, it can be defined as a non-synchronous, inter/intra-linguistic and diasemiotic translation. Though preserving the inspirational and linguistic peculiarities of respeaking as a process, here, the target text has a number of features that clearly differentiate it from the translational process underlying its production. First, subtitles are perceived through a different channel than the original soundtrack: they are displayed together with images, thus creating a completely different interaction between the various verbal and non-verbal components if the initial interrelation between images and sound is considered. Moreover, live subtitles are displayed on screen with a given delay, hence they are non-
synchronous to the production of the original text.

From this short definition, it should be clear that respeaking is a transcription, a reformulation, or a translation of a spoken text. It is produced by the respeaker, processed by a speech recognition software and broadcast simultaneously to the production of the original text, be it sports, news or other programmes being broadcast live and requiring real-time subtitling. According to the end users’ needs, the output can be displayed in a variety of different formats and colours.

3. Origins

The European Commission promoted the year 2003 as the European Year of Disabled People to raise awareness of the rights of disabled people to equality and full participation in everyday life. This means that broadcasters have to provide people with visual and hearing impairments to their programmes. As stated on the BBC public website in their pages devoted to the access services, BBC Research and Development department has taken a major role in developing technologies to make this happen. They provide three distinct access services, as they call them. The first is audio description, meaning additional audio tracks describing images to the visually impaired so as to let them better understand a programme. The second is sign language interpreting, which allows deaf signers to understand the programme content. In a digital environment, a signing component may, in the future, be a selectable option for some programmes. For now, it is open. The third is subtitling for the deaf, both inter-/intra-lingual and pre-produced/real-time.

In the UK, as in many other countries, the proportion of subtitled TV programmes is increasing significantly not just because of legislation but also because of deaf associations lobbying for that. That is why, in 2001 BBC subtitled about 50% of their programmes. This has reached 80% in 2006. This growth is set to continue: the BBC’s commitment is to provide subtitles for all its programmes by 2008.

However, this increasing demand for subtitling, exacerbated by the rise in number of television channels, has raised the question of how subtitling could be achieved rapidly and cost effectively. Considering that the two ways to provide real-time subtitling are stenography and respeaking, respeaking is a winning solution, because it helps to reduce costs for recruitment, training and payment of staff. Moreover it provides greater flexibility.

To sum up, as the responsible for training at the respeaking department at BBC well explains:

“Respeaking came into being for three main reasons. Firstly, there was a growing demand from deaf and hard of hearing communities for a greater proportion of television broadcasts to be subtitled.

Secondly, and perhaps consequently, the Broadcasting Act of 1990 stipulated that, from 1998, 50% of all television channels’ output should be subtitled. That target rose to 90% by 2010, but the BBC’s own target is to subtitle 100% of output by 2008.

1 As it happens with BBC Wales, the news are translated from Welsh Gaelic into British English. http://www.bbc.co.uk/info/policies/subtitles.shtml (last accessed 31/12/2006).
Thirdly, modern stenography, better defined as stenotyping, is a highly specialised skill that takes years to master; therefore, stenographers are not only thin on the ground but also able to demand high salaries. To meet its subtitling targets, the BBC had to find an alternative method of subtitling live programmes that was both practical and cost-effective (Marsh 2004: 22).

4. The end-users

As pointed out above, intra-lingual subtitles were introduced to help deaf and hard-of-hearing people to follow important TV programmes and provide them with full accessibility to their content. Contrary to expectations, deafness affects a large proportion of the population and the number of people with hearing losses is considerably high. Statistics conducted on behalf of BBC\(^3\) highlight that, in the United Kingdom, 55% of the population with more than 60 years of age suffer from some hearing problems that seriously hinder them from a full access to their audiovisual broadcasting services. Unfortunately, the same applies to more than 2% of much younger citizens. This means, that in the United Kingdom alone, with a total population of more than 60 million people, the issue concerns more than 9 million people, 1 out of 7.

A part from deaf and hard-of-hearing people, intralinguistic subtitles can be of great help to a high number of people, who, for both linguistic or environmental reasons, cannot have full access to the audiovisual content. Data gathered from BBC\(^4\) claim that a substantial number of people benefiting from subtitles includes tourists, first generation immigrants and all those who work or live in a noisy environment - housewives and nurses with small children, guests of bars, restaurants, pubs, etc.

Finally, it is necessary to remember that BBC programmes, together with their subtitles, are broadcast all around the world. Thanks to cable TV, digital satellite broadcasting and more recently also thanks to high-quality Internet streaming, intra-lingual subtitles can be of extreme help to a huge number of foreigners learning or consolidating the English language. Providing a written information on the screen, subtitles can help them to improve their writing skills; at the same time, for thousands of English natives who live in a non-English-speaking country, they can also function as a convenient way to ‘keep in touch’ with their mother tongue, providing them with both a written and an oral input.

5. Programmes

Like simultaneous interpreters, respeakers at BBC work in soundproof booths that acoustically isolate them from unnecessary noise. Unless the working session is shorter than one hour, there are always two respeakers in a workstation. Depending on their experience, text difficulty and personal preference, there is a microphone switch-over between the two respeakers every

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3 Statistics produced by the BBC with feedback data gathered between 9 November and 8 December 2004. All of their customers were invited to access and assess their subtitling service. The resulting document is strictly confidential and the author of the present article was granted the right to publish some of its data.

15-30 minutes. The level of competence required by each programme is different; especially important to this respect are both the speed at which the original text is produced and its intrinsic complexity, i.e. complexity degree of the syntactic structure, use of idiomatic expressions and above all, its level of technicality (Marsh 2005).

At BBC, the news and the parliamentary sessions are considered as the most difficult and challenging task for any respeaker. In both cases, the respeaker can be confronted with tens of different topics, and the shift from one context to an other can be fairly quick and unexpected. In these two types of programme, moreover, respeakers are challenged by a high number of technical terms and by a proportionally high speed of delivery as well (*ibidem*).

A further consideration is needed for the parliamentary sessions, where other factors can influence respeaking. Whereas in the news the original text is read out by the same journalist or by a few reporters who are professional speakers trained to achieve a standard pronunciation, parliamentary sessions are characterized by a very rapid turn-taking habit by politicians with no pronunciation training. At times this can be a serious obstacle even for experienced respeakers. Moreover, politicians sometimes tend to speak off the cuff, without planning their speech which is, occasionally, full of technical expressions (Fairclough 1989).

Other live programmes like sport matches are far less demanding and the cognitive load for respeakers is significantly reduced. In these programmes, though syntactic compression is often required, the live action visible on screen is usually self-explanatory and the respeaker’s main task is generally limited to a correct identification of the single players involved in a given action. This is not to say that subtitling sports does not require a certain degree of professional skills. However, respeakers can work up to 40 consecutive minutes in this type of programmes, since the level of technicality is rather low and easily identifiable beforehand. That is why, sport games with a particularly ‘slow pace’ like snooker are often used to train junior respeakers and make them confident to deal with the professional setting (Marsh 2005).

As a final consideration, it is interesting to note that respeakers of a single programme must not necessarily all work in the same physical place. The BBC, for example, has respeaking booths and facilities scattered all around the country, so as to guarantee full support to many regional programmes and allow respeakers to work directly from any remote workstation, or even from home. An internal network connects these remote workstations through the Internet. A standard signal is used then amongst the various clients to require a microphone switch-over and all the participating respeakers can signal any problem to their working colleagues (*ibidem*).

6. **Know-how and competences**

Although speech recognition software products have improved significantly since their first available versions, and although their speech engines are now capable of handling much more complex prosodic patterns together with better lexical and voice training capabilities than ever before, many adjustments are still needed and the overall accuracy can be still compromised by a number of external factors.
First, to achieve good recognition, the microphone has to be calibrated in order to provide the software programme with the right level of background noise, so as to allow the recognition engine to distinguish underground noise from the voice of the respeaker. Then, each respeaker has to create her/his voice profile in order to allow the speech recognition software to adapt to the respeaker’s own voice, whose peculiarities are unique to each person.

Once the software programme is ready, a number of specific professional competences are required to achieve optimum performance under most of circumstances and contexts. Particularly, the respeaker has to master three main competences: phonetic, editorial and psycho-cognitive.

Phonetically, the respeaker has to articulate each word, avoiding both intentional non-lexical events, like extra sounds, nasalizations, grounding, lengthening the ending syllable of a word, or other excessive prosodic patterns; and non-intentional non-lexical events, like coughing, sneezing, etc. (cf. Savino et al.). Additionally, though a speech recognition software is designed to discern minimum meaningful word units depending on the context, homophony can occur under certain circumstances and result in a wrong transcription. It is therefore up to respeakers to try and adapt to software peculiarities by pronouncing words as single occurrences, especially when a given text string can be written as both one word or two words (e.g. “be long” vs. “belong”) (LamBourne et al. 2004).

Editorially, the respeaker has to précis when necessary. The amount of words per minute vary according to the programme to be subtitled. If during a snooker match, commentators never pronounce more than a hundred words per minute, politicians can even reach 300 words per minute. In order to produce ‘acceptable’ subtitles, a respeaker has to concentrate on important meaning units and to “avoid all ‘idea units’ which are unnecessary” (Ofcom, 2003: 26).

Psycho-cognitively, respeakers must manage their cognitive load, even under very demanding situations. They have to listen to the source text, process it and speak at the same time. Moreover, respeakers have to deal with the twofold feedback effect caused by their voice and by possible mistakes that can appear on screen even if the voice input is perfect.

Finally, another competence that is relevant to respeaking and of great importance for the final product but rarely considered is the respeaker’s familiarity with a given topic or genre. The less it is, the more difficult will be understanding and reformulating the source text. On the contrary, the respeaker’s cognitive load will be significantly lower, usually implying more accuracy.

Familiarity with a specific context is extremely important for the software programme as well. When it is trained in a specific semantic domain, recognition will be faster and accuracy higher. To this respect, Marsh (2005: 28) argues that:

However well prepared a respeaker is before going on air, all manner of unexpected content can arise. If a respeaker doesn’t have the necessary vocabulary trained into his or her dictionary in advance, it is impossible to use it in the subtitles. For example, if a speaker is talking about the ‘Kyoto Treaty’ and Via Voice’s dictionary does not contain it, it will produce something similar-sounding in its place, such as the ‘key auto treaty’. A respeaker, therefore, has to find a way of
communicating the message without mentioning the problematic word itself.

7. Live programmes and Semi-Live Programmes

As stated in the White Paper of the Research and Development department, subtitling can be used for programmes “for which no pre-recording or transcripts exists, i.e. live programmes or programmes that are edited very close to the time of transmission” (Evans 2003: 9). More specifically, live subtitling is used for four main kinds of programmes: sports; news; parliamentary sessions; and special events such as royal weddings, the Live8, or a declaration of war.

According to the method used for broadcasting, these four macro-genres can be grouped into two main categories: live and semi-live programmes. In live programmes, the text is produced exclusively on the spot, since the live event it refers to is happening exactly at the same time, e.g. sports events, parliamentary sessions, etc. Semi-live programmes are also broadcast live, but the subtitler has a chance to receive a transcript or an audio track beforehand. The news is a clear example of a semi-live programme. The text, usually pre-prepared, is either read by the anchor or pre-recorded as a news report. Some other famous public shows and events like the Annual Academy Awards also belong to this category due to their format. Though sounding spontaneous, most of the dialogues of speakers are prepared in advance and read aloud by a teleprompter.

This distinction between live and semi-live events has a significant impact on accuracy and the way respeakers approach their job. In live programmes, respeakers do not have the chance to read the text in advance. However, they know the topic and can train the recognition software to better understand all toponyms, technical jargon and any other expression that might be pronounced by speakers (e.g. the names of footballers of a match; those of politicians attending a parliamentary session; those of special guests, places and institutions to be mentioned in a given special event.). Respeakers perform their most difficult and psycho-cognitively demanding task, not just because of unknown content to subtitle in real time, but also of features of orality to be edited, so as to make the end result more readable and understandable by end users.

In semi-live programmes, instead, respeakers can explore the whole text beforehand and train the software programme to recognize all unusual terms that are used, thus reducing their stress and increasing the overall accuracy of the output text. The real-time event will be characterized by ‘semi-spontaneous’ dialogues, without the typical features of any spontaneous spoken text, i.e. pauses, false starts, extra sounds, reformulations, unfinished sentences, and so on.

8. From theory to practice: the analysis of a subtitled piece of news

The news are an example of information TV genre. The European Broadcasting Union (1995: 25) defines news programmes and every information programme in general as a:

Programme intended primarily to inform about current facts, situations, events, theories

5 In those cases time is enough to prepare subtitles in advance, the subtitler only needs to send them online simultaneously to their occurrence. Such cases are not of interest to the topic of the present paper and not discussed.
or forecasts, or to provide explanatory background information and advice. Information programme content has to be non-durable, that is to say that one could not imagine that the same programme would be transmitted e.g. one year later without losing most of its relevance.

The verbal component is then of paramount importance. Precisely because of that, RNID has asked for a full access to these kinds of programmes. Consequently, respeakers are called to reproduce the source text as faithfully as possible when subtitling the news. However, a deep analysis of a thirty-minute session of BBC News 24 has shown that, despite respeakers do their best to stick to this request, the final product is never a word-for-word rendition of the original text, because of omissions, expansions, reformulations and mistakes.

After having timed every single piece of news of July 4, 2005 BBC news 24’s midday edition, the slowest report and the most rapid one have been analysed. In particular, the slowest piece of news had an average speech rate of 141 words per minute. The subtitles of this piece of news transferred 97.4% of the words of the original text (298 against 306). Though 3.6% of the words have been left out none of the idea units was lost. For example, in the case of:

“We should sort of approach it in the right and diplomatic spirit.”

the subtitle read:

“We should approach it in the right and diplomatic spirit.”

Having been considered as a filler and not as a meaningful phrase, “sort of” was omitted without a loss in the meaning of the idea unit. Concerning expansions, just one example was detected in the whole 30 minutes, paradoxically in the most rapid piece of news. That is why it will be dealt with later. As far as reformulations are concerned, they generally happen at the word level. On the total amount of words in the analysed pieces, they represent just 0.95%. In the following sentence:

“Which I will do.”

the subtitle read:

“Which I would do.”

Here, it is quite difficult to say what is the reason for this unnecessary change: either the software programme misrecognised it or the respeaker misheard it. Finally, as for accuracy, the rate was very high, 99.7%. The only mistake occurred being the verb “disparage”, which was split in the subtitles into two words sounding the same: “dis” and “parge”.

If we consider the most rapid piece of news, the speech rate was of 165 words per minute. Interestingly, here again the total number of idea units was transferred, except for the name and affiliation of the reporter. One reason for that may be that the name and affiliation of the reporter are displayed at the beginning of the report on the bottom right of the screen. Then they may have been considered as superfluous and omitted. Moreover, these elements occur at the end of the news report, immediately before the anchor starts speaking again. This means they may be excluded for synchronicity reasons.
Editorially, with the word rate increasing, the amount of transferred words changes. It decreased to 97% of the original (418 words against 431 in the original), 0.4% less than in the previous case. Accuracy equally diminished to 99.3%. Consequently, the number of omissions and reformulations increased. Omissions accounted for 4.2% of the original and reformulations for 1.6%. Interestingly, even the nature of both omissions and reformulations changed. Omissions were indeed more syntactic than in the previous case. In the sentence:

“They were jumping around, hitting the windows, hitting the sides and the roof of the vehicle”

repetitions were omitted as follows:

“They were jumping around, hitting the windows and sides and roof of the vehicle”.

Similarly, reformulations tended to syntactically simplify the sentence structure. The sentence:

“There were some locals from Edinburgh who were involved”

was shortened as follows:

“There were some locals from Edinburgh involved.”

A final mention is worth the only case of expansion in the whole 30 minutes. The sentence:

“Our Scotland correspondent John Morrison is outside the court”

was turned into one main sentence and a relative clause:

“Let’s cross live now to our Scotland correspondent John Morrison, who is outside the court”

The reason for that is probably that formulaic expressions are used to introduce a news reporter, one being “Let’s cross live now to our correspondent…” . Probably, the respeaker has not waited for the journalist to be introduce and anticipated the speaker by pronouncing a sentence which would not have altered the information load of the source text, in any case.

9. Conclusions

This paper has investigated respeaking, an extremely recent form of audiovisual translation based on speech recognition, a technology that, as such, has been available for many years. Only recently it has started performing well enough to guarantee the production of accurate real-time subtitles.

Though further research is undoubtedly needed, in this paper an attempt was made to provide an exhaustive overview of the subject, covering several aspects: the textual audiovisual genres subtitled; the reasons why it came into being; the potential audience of real-time subtitles; the professional requirements and constraints; the technical aspects; and, last but not least, the professional competences any respeaker should master in order to face the most challenging situations.
Moreover, a real case was analysed. It was shown how much speech rate affects the accuracy of the target text and increases the number of strategies a respeaker has to adopt in order to make the source text shorter so as to transfer all idea units. However, an interesting piece of counterevidence was shown: the only case of expansion occurring in the most rapid report.

Though this article is a modest attempt to shed some light on respeaking, its appropriate implementation clearly seems of help, to both further reduce subtitling costs and widely increase media accessibility. In the last few years, respeaking has definitely arisen strong interest amongst the scientific and academic community. In addition, many TV companies increasingly look at this technique as an important resource for the coming years. Hopefully, further scientific research will follow in this new area, thus helping TV companies to produce high quality subtitles and foster integration of the deaf community. By doing so, they will have full access to the majority of TV programmes, both pre-recorded and live not only in the UK, but also in the rest of the world.
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