Surtitling

Introduction

Sebeok (in Gorlee 1997, p.236) states that opera is "perhaps the most complex of syncretic objects, involving the **literary**, **musical**, and **scenic arts**, with inputs from a still wider array of codes". Opera is a form of theatre in which music is a fundamental component and dramatic roles are taken by singers, but is distinct from musical theatre

Definition of Surtitles

Also known as **supertitles**, **SurCaps**, **OpTrans**, are translated or transcribed lyrics/dialogue projected above a stage or displayed on a screen, commonly used in opera, theatre or other musical performances. The word "surtitle" comes from the French language "**sur**", meaning "**over**" or "**on**", and the English language word "**title**", formed in a similar way to the related subtitle. The word Surtitle is a trademark of the Canadian Opera Company.

Historical review

The advent of surtitling in the 1980s brought a partial solution: it offered a way of presenting the verbal content of the opera simultaneously with its performance in the original language. This new formula, though it annoyed some purists, was generally perceived as being "audience-friendly" and beneficial to budgeting.

Historical review

A historical overview of this practice indicates its originating around 1984 in Canada by the Canadian Opera Company during the staging of **Elektra** by **Richard Strauss**. Since it was impossible to patent the solutions at the very beginning, the originators managed to register the brand name, i.e. SURTITLES™, which was chosen in order to acknowledge the bilingual environment in Canada (hence the prefix sur-). By the 1990s, dozens of opera companies were using surtitles for some, if not all, of their foreign-language productions. This was seldom done without opposition, particularly from traditionalists.

Historical review

At the same time, there was a demand for "**singable translations**" of operas, which translators strove to satisfy, sometimes even before the work had been premiered in the "original" language. Composers as eminent as Wagner and Puccini expressed the wish that their works be presented "in the language of the audience." They placed some value on comprehension of the words, and so did many opera-goers.

The rapid spread of surtitling is easy to explain: it offered a promising new approach to two old problems of opera — **intelligibility** and **cost**.

Textual perspective

The important question here is what should be regarded as the source text for the production of surtitles:

– the full prose libretto (the textual basis for every opera, forming an integral element of the staging along with music and the visual spectacle (Dzioch-Korkuz 2020, p.3),

– the singable version, or

– the original work on which the libretto is based.

Textual perspective

Linguistic and textual difficulties of surtitling include **'condensation**, **ensembles**, **repetitions**, **melismas**, **poetic** or **overblown styles**, **archaism**, **synchronization**, **adaptation of cultural**, **humoristic** and **historical references**, the need to create comprehensible surtitles that form a logical unit, the avoidance of previous translations and the avoidance of representing in writing both onomatopoeias and all sounds which are clearly recognizable by the public, since they may detract attention'. (Ibid)

Textual perspective

Another main potential challenges pertain to:

– the use of dialect and non-standard varieties of language – which should be rendered in such a way that allows for an accessible reading experience;

– overlapping dialogue and decisions regarding the timing of different bits of speech;

– the density of words and repetitions.

Textual perspective

This imposes **four elements** in focus when translating for the opera:

-Firstly, the translation should rely on the music score and follow the stage instructions;

-secondly, rhythm takes precedence over rhyme;

-poetical feeling should be prioritized, which effectively entails the need to avoid compensation by explanation;

-finally, all elements which convey a certain atmosphere (archaic tone, specialized vocabulary or register to mark social differences).

Possible techniques adopted in surtitling

–**Number of characters** per line. (each caption or surtitle contains on average up to a maximum of 40 characters).

–Preferred **fonts** are typically Arial, Courier New or Helvetica, with size set typically around **16**.

–The **timing** of the titles need to keep with the rhythm and the pace of the performance.

–adapt the **titles** to the actual performance.

–**Italics** are only used in surtitling and indicate that the voice is off–stage or are used for emphasis.

–**Quotation** marks are used for reported speech and brackets may identify an aside.

–**Titles** are usually **centered** or **left aligned**. (though alignment can follow the position of the characters on the stage).

Possible techniques adopted in surtitling

– the portrayal of dialect, non-standard language
    varieties and accents can be either
    rendered phonetically or a description can be
    inserted [-------ACCENT]
– a label can be included to alert the audience to the
    existence of an overlap (using dashes for every
    speaker).
– in case of repetition: either repeat the lines or simply
    resort to a label that indicates that there is
    a repetition. [THEY REPEAT]
– sound captions need to be included only when they add
    to what is happening on the stage. [WATER DRIPS]

Social perspective

As opera had started to alienate audiences, especially younger generations, due to a certain lack of intelligibility, the advent of surtitling brought a solution not only in terms of provision of a more 'audience-friendly performance but also one which could potentially lead to financial gains by an increase in the number of patrons attracted by this service. (Low 2002)

Social perspective

Also, by providing accessible captioned performances, opera is now available for people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

In sum surtitling made opera accessible and more appreciable among groups of people who were unable to comprehend the gist of the show without surtitling.

Technical perspective

The technical aspect of surtitling involves the text which is usually presented on one or several display units that are located on, near the set or close to the audience members. A professional captioner or surtitler, sitting in the control box or in a dedicated area, but always in line of sight of the stage and the units, cues the lines of the pre-prepared script in sync with the live performance.

Technical perspective

There is no standard system for providing surtitling since the needs of every venue may be different. Display scenarios can vary :

Technical perspective

- slides are projected on a screen using a digital projector,

Technical perspective

-settings equipped with complex LED screens,

Technical perspective

- hand-held devices or intelligent glasses.

New developments

Solutions are rapidly developing to provide viewers with a customized experience and diversify the way in which information is presented to an ever more segmented and discerning audience such as the new **Google Glasses** which is considered as an innovative way of presenting captions and the **Epson smart glasses** with which the user could take control of the timing and what text got projected on the glasses. Speech recognition tools such as **Dragon Naturally Speaking** are also vital for remote captioning of live events when a pre-prepared script is not available.

THANK YOU