

# DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND THE SUBTITLES OF DOCUMENTARIES: THE CASE OF *THE CHILDREN OF RUSSIA*\*

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**Abstract:** This article analyses the subtitling of a documentary *Los niños de Rusia* “The Children of Russia”, (José Camino, 2001) by using a discourse analysis approach and exploring the *skopos* of the text. My aim is to identify which transformations are more likely to occur when oral discourse is reduced as a consequence of space and time limits of audiovisual translation. The analysis reveals a tendency to consider repetition of linguistic features redundant, thus favouring deletion of these forms regardless of their illocutionary force. This tendency, at times, provides an impoverished version of the original text.

**Key words:** audiovisual translation, subtitling, translation studies, discourse analysis, emotions.

**Resumen:** En este manuscrito se estudia el documental titulado *Los niños de Rusia* de José Camino (2001) utilizando el enfoque del análisis del discurso con el fin de comprender las transformaciones lingüísticas que a menudo se utilizan para compensar las limitaciones de espacio y tiempo que surgen en las traducciones audiovisuales. El análisis sugiere una tendencia en considerar las repeticiones de palabras como una redundancia lingüística y por lo tanto opta con la eliminación de ellas, reduciendo así la fuerza ‘illocutionaria’ del discurso oral y produciendo un texto más empobrecido que su original.

**Palabras claves:** traducción audiovisual, subtítulos, estudios de traducción, emociones.

Subtitling is an amphibion (*sic*): it flows with the current of speech, defining the pace of reception; it jumps at regular intervals, allowing a new text chunk to be read; and flying over the audiovisual landscape, it does not mingle with the human voices of that landscape: instead it provides the audience with a bird’s-eye view of the scenery. (Gottlieb 1994: 101, quoted also in Díaz 2003: 32)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This manuscript explores the subtitling of a documentary *Los niños de Rusia* [“The Children of Russia”], that narrates the story of 18 women and men from the Basque and

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Asturian regions of Spain who were sent to Russia during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) when they were 8 to 14 years old.

Families made the hard decision of sending an estimated 3,000 children to Russia to save them from the trauma of war, starvation and perhaps death.

What was expected to be a short-term trip to Russia, turned out to be a lifetime of exile due to the political situation of both Spain and Russia which obstructed the return of the children. Some stayed in Russia for over 20 years and some returned to Spain as adults. For the latter, the resettlement back in their native country was complicated by the many years they had spent away from their families and homes. A crisis of identity is unveiled in the film as well as their mixed emotions about the time spent in Russia and the delay of authorities to grant permits for a return to Spain.

The film was directed and produced by Jaime Camino and screened in Spain in 2001, obtaining the prize *Tiempo de Historia* at the International *Festival in Valladolid* and the prize *Sant Jordi*. It was nominated for a Goya prize in the section of the best documentary. The subtitles I am studying in this manuscript were produced by SBS Australia<sup>1</sup> in 2003.

### 1.1. Definition

Subtitling is regarded as an intersemiotic translation transforming speech into a written form. Following Assis (2001), subtitling involves a change of medium (speech v/s writing), channel (auditory v/s visual), form of signals (phonic v/s graphic) and code (speech form v/s written form). In terms of subtitles classification the literature identifies them as *intralingual* and *interlingual*. *Intralingual subtitles* represent the speech of a language into a written form of the same language while *interlingual subtitles* accomplish the subtitling by working with different languages (e.g. from Spanish into English). In Gottlieb's words (1997) *interlingual subtitling* has a 'diagonal quality: ...the subtitler 'crosses over' from interpreting the spoken foreign-language dialog to presenting a written domestic-language translation on the screen' (1997: 311). This article focuses only on the *interlingual subtitling*.

In the process of transforming the aural medium into the written medium within the cultural framework of adaptation, time constraints and space limits, some transformations take place (Díaz 2003, Koolstra *et al.* 2003, Krunger 2001; see also Schröter 2003 for references). According to Schröter (2003) condensation or reduction is an inevitable consequence of subtitling and the condensation that takes place is relative to the language pair. In the case of the English-Swedish pair it is about 1/3, while Gottlieb indicates that there could be between 20-50% reductions in some language pairs (Gottlieb 1994 quoted in Schröter 2003: 107). This is so because, usually, the length of time a subtitle is shown on the screen follows a six-second rule and the number of words including spaces does not usually exceed 64 words in a maximum of two lines (Díaz 2001, Koolstra *et al.* 2002,

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<sup>1</sup> SBS was established in Australia 1980. The broadcasting of subtitled movies has always been a fundamental part of SBS television: "The principal function of the SBS Corporation is to provide multilingual and multicultural radio and television services that inform, educate and entertain all Australians and in doing so, reflect Australia's multicultural society." (Mueller 2001: 143)

Kruger 2001). In spite of the limitation to the number of words visible on the screen at any given time, Koolstra *et al.* estimate that experienced subtitlers are able to offer subtitles that “are of equal value to the original information and condensation will not lead to loss of information” (Koolstra *et al.* 2002: 328). In this regard, subtitlers have some commonalities with interpreters who have to select relevant information from the original version to transfer into the other language (Díaz 2001: 5). Although audiovisual translation takes for granted that reduction is part of the task, no clear guidance is given to professionals to select those linguistic features that could be avoided, deleted or condensed without risking misinterpreting or giving a partial version of the original text. Previous studies indicate that subtitling usually follows a written style that tends to “influence the translation choices made in subtitling” (Assis 2001), consequently “most of the omitted feature words, [ ] are exclamations (*my goodness!*), short answers (*yup*) [and] requests for clarification (*beg your pardon?*)” (Schröter 2003: 110). In addition, subtitling discourages the use of linguistic features like ellipsis, repetitions, omissions and periphrasis (Assis, 2001 and Krasovska 2004) as well as “...elements of the linguistic exchanges that fulfil a phatic function such as fillers (you know, man, I mean...), vocatives and expressions as a way of introduction (hi, hello, hiya, bye) [that] can be eliminated along with repetitions that do not have a particular relevance” (Díaz 2001: 5) and generally promotes condensation (Kruger 2001).

It can be argued that condensation and reduction are required in subtitling but the key question is at what price? What can be deleted without compromising the meaning?

It is my interest to unveil what has been left out in the subtitling of *The Children of Russia* and what has been successfully condensed to accomplish a subtitling that can convey the metamessage within the allocated space and time.

Much of the debate around the academic value of subtitling springs from the fact that subtitling is regarded as an adaptation and reductional process with little connection to translation studies (Díaz 2003: 33).

In this work I will show that subtitling is a field of research, as it has been shown in the 2004 London Conference (see Orero 2003), which can significantly contribute to the community of the film industry, interpreters and translators, to make an audience knowledgeable in the linguistic and socio-cultural context of a given text.

This position is supported by Orero who in the introduction of the book *Topics in Audiovisual Translation* states that “we are now in a fast shifting technical audiovisual society, which started at the end of the nineteenth-century, and Audiovisual Translation Studies should be the academic field which studies the new reality of a society which is media-oriented” (2004: xi).

At the core of Translation Studies is the theory of *skopos* which places particular emphasis on conveying a communicative act by looking at both the object level (the language) and the social-cultural level (Vermeer 1994: 11). Thus, according to Vermeer (2000: 231) a translation is successfully accomplished when there is a connection between the end product and the established aim. In fact, many scholars identify the importance of keeping in mind both the target audience and the *skopos* when translating because of their fundamental role in modulating how the text is translated (Kovacic 1995: 229, Remeal 2001:19).

This research uses a discourse analysis approach to study how the illocutionary force<sup>2</sup> of a communicative act is conveyed in the English subtitling of the film under investigation. It also investigates the *skopos* of the subtitling through a detailed analysis of the linguistic processes used to achieve a condensed text within the limits of audio-visual translation.

### 1.2. Research questions

This research project aims to:

1. Explore which linguistic features are mostly omitted in a documentary, specifically *The Children of Russia*.
2. Investigate whether the use of condensation or omission misrepresents the original text.
3. Understand whether condensation contributes to convey the information from the original text.

### 1.3. Method

For the purpose of this study I have transcribed the natural speech of two Spanish women and identified the subtitles that were shown on the screen simultaneously. These two female participants were selected on the basis of their recurrent interventions in the film. Each extract is analysed by identifying any transformation that takes place in the subtitling and later categorised to distinguish the recurrent patterns. This manuscript will be centred on the use of condensation/reduction.

## 2. ANALYSIS

The analysis in this manuscript will focus on:

- Repetition and condensation: Favouring a written style.
- Repetition and condensation: Missing the illocutionary force.

Particular attention will be given to those utterances that miss the illocutionary force (see point 2.2) in their transformation from speech into the written form. Future publications will focused on developing an understanding of those utterances that successfully convey the illocutionary force in spite of being condensed.

### 2.1. Repetition and condensation: Favouring a written style

Following Assis (2001) condensation is achieved by avoiding repetition of verbal features that do not provide additional information. In the examples below repetition of prepositions, articles and lexicon items when uttered in a sequence are avoided.

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<sup>2</sup> Austin (1962) classifies speech acts as: locutionary (the meaning of sentence or utterance), illocutionary (the force that a sentence or utterance has when used) and perlocutionary (the effect(s) the sentence or utterance has on the hearer).

## Example 1 (Extract 14)

“...los chicos iban llenos de piojos de pulgas de todo de porquerías hasta las narices. Entonces yo pasando uno por uno a los chicos todos *los los les*\* afeitaban la cabeza”.

‘...We were up to our ears in filth. We were dealt with one by one. The boys had their heads shaven’.

## Example 2 (Extract 14)

“...Con unas caras de hambres de piojosos *de de de* sucios de terrible porque fijate *que que que* viaje habíamos hecho.”

‘We looked starved, full of lice, dirty... we looked horrible. Imagine the trip we’d made’.

In the above examples the deleted linguistic features did not compromise the meaning of the speech and allowed the written text to flow better without the disruption of the ‘unplanned talk’ (Cameron 2001: 33). The inclusion of a chain of articles and prepositions, as examples 1 and 2 have shown, to assimilate the verbal production in the subtitling might have caused confusion to an audience who is reading the text. Nevertheless, as I will argue below, repetition does not always represent a redundant feature that can be simply eliminated without compromising the illocutionary force of the speech.

## 2.2. Repetition and condensation: Missing the illocutionary force

Although the avoidance of repetition as shown above may not necessarily compromise the meaning of the utterance, an automated-mode of avoiding the repetition of words may alter the illocutionary force attached to the repetition and therefore minimize the effect of the act as originally intended. The use of repetition, as for the examples shown below, aimed at emphasizing the emotional state of mind that speakers experienced at particular times and its omission will unequivocally lead to partial transfer of the intended message. In the data under analysis emotions of surprise, sadness, anger and fear are not fully translated from Spanish into English missing the illocutionary force that is attached to the original form.

It is not the expressive speech act (communicative acts that express feelings and attitudes such as apologies, thanking, deploring), following Austin’s theory of speech acts (1962) that is missing because in some cases the speaker does not directly use one, but it is the intended force associated with the repetition of a particular word or a group of words as well as the inclusion of some discourse markers that have been ignored.

To illustrate this point I present the following examples:

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\* Italicized words in Spanish –or its subtitles in English– appearing in the original documentary refer to linguistic items emphasized by the author. (*Editor’s Note*)

Example 3 (Extract 5). In the following extract Araceli, one of the interviewees, remembers the time when she asked her mother whether she should go to Russia or stay in Spain.

“... dije madre ¿me quedo o me voy? dice ¿tú qué quieres? yo quiero irme así dice pues *vete vete* que allá tú serás algo.”

‘Shall I stay or shall I go? She asked me what I wanted to do and I said I wanted to go. And she said “**Then go**”. You might become somebody there.’

The repetition of the imperative form ‘vete’ [lit. ‘go’] twice represents an example in which Araceli’s mother manifests her lack of confidence in the future her daughter can expect in Spain and in her despair encourages and pleads with her daughter to go to Russia. The repetition also marks the urgency of going overseas because it is uttered after “pues” ‘then’ a consecutive particle that indicates that the speaker has come to a resolution. Besides, the future idea that follows “vete” ‘go’ in “you might become somebody there” reiterates the emphasis that has been missed in the subtitle of “vete”. If “vete, vete” [lit. ‘go, go’] is translated as ‘then go’ what difference would the subtitle make if only a single “vete” [lit. go] was uttered?

An alternative subtitle to convey the illocutionary force might have been: “**Then you must go.**”\*\*\*

Similar example is presented in the next extract where Araceli’s parents and sister are waiting to reunite with her after the many years she has been living in Russia.

Example 4 (Extract 31)

...“¡aquí viene mi hermana! y *chillaba* ¡Araceli! y *Dio-* ¿dónde estará? entonces ¡Araceli Araceli Araceli! y padre y madre *venga, ven, aquí ven aquí*”

“...Here comes my sister!” “Araceli!” I didn’t know where she was and kept hearing “Araceli!” Then my father and mother saw me and said “**Over here!**”

Araceli’s remembrance of the reunion in Spain is marked with a series of linguistic features that indicate the state of mind of Araceli’s family who was waiting for her after so many years of being away in Russia, nevertheless this strong emotion is not fully conveyed in the subtitling.

The verb “chillaba” [lit. ‘yelled’], the expression “y Dio-” [lit. ‘Oh God’], and the repetitive use of the verb “venir” [lit. come] are not made available in the subtitling. “Chillaba” [lit. ‘yelled’] indicates the quality of Araceli’s voice and provide a visual image of the scene, “Dio-” [lit. ‘Oh God’], an exclamation that indicates uncertainty – where is she? The repetitive use of “*venga, ven, aquí ven aquí*” [lit. ‘come, come, here

\*\* Bold-typed words or phrases make reference to subtitles appearing in documentary (*Editor’s Note*).

\*\*\* Words or sentences in a different font (*Textile*) refer to alternative translations offered by the author (*Editor’s Note*).

come here'] illustrates the overwhelming emotion of seeing a loved one after a very long absence. To simply use 'over here' for "*venga, ven, aquí ven aquí*" [lit. 'come, come, here come here'] misses the cumulative effect accomplished by a sequence of discourse markers that indicate deep emotion and whose illocutionary force is precisely to pass this emotion on to the hearer. An alternative subtitling could have been:

'...Here comes my sister! Araceli! **Oh my God** I didn't know where she was and kept hearing Araceli! Then my father and mother saw me and **couldn't stop saying "Over here!" over here.**

The following example illustrates a set of linguistic features that the narrator uses, one after another, to convey her strong feelings in recalling a sad event. The extract describes when school mates went to cheer their team and suddenly the match was interrupted by an announcement that Russia had been invaded by the fascists.

#### Example 5 (Extract 16)

"Íbamos a un campo que estaba cerca de nuestro colegio de donde estábamos y fuimos a verlos a verlos y a a a vibrar con todas nuestras almas para que ganaran los nuestros ¿no? no los soviéticos y cuando estábamos en ese auge tan se paran los mili- los megáfonos todas un silencio y dice atención atención que iba a hablar Molotov. Pero un silencio ¿qué pasará? y entonces él comunica que la Unión Soviética había sido invadida por las por fascistas y tal y tal y tal y tal y que desde e- ese mismo momento todo el mundo fuera a sus trabajos a sus lugares porque empezábamos ya a vivir para ganar la guerra ¡Ehh! y fue espantoso para nosotros fue eso madre mía..."

'We'd go to a field that was near our school. We went to see them. We went to see them and to cheer for them so that our team would win, not the Soviets. And in the middle of all that fervour we could hear calls to attention through the loudspeakers and the announcement that Molotov was about to speak. We were wondering what it was all about. Then he made the announcement that the Soviet Union had been invaded by the fascist forces and so on and so on. He also said that right there and then everybody should go back to their workplaces because now the purpose of life was winning the war. *It was such a shock for us...*'

In the first utterance the subtitling repeats the form "a verlos" 'to see them' twice as the original version. Nevertheless, a close analysis of the extract reveals that the emotion of this extract is mainly indexed by two discourse markers that reveal the narrator's intense emotional feelings in recounting the story. The repetition of a "verlos" 'to see them' could be avoided since it does contribute to convey the emotions captured by "*vibrar con todas nuestras almas*" [lit. **to be deeply touched to the depth of our souls**] and "*¡Ehh! y fue espantoso para nosotros fue eso madre mía...*" [lit. 'Oh! That was awful for us, that was oh my God!'] the translations of which could have contributed in passing on to the reader the profound feelings of the narrator.

'To cheer for them' as a translation of "*vibrar con todas nuestras almas*" overlooks the profound feeling of the expression which is emphasized by the tag question "¿no?" [lit.

‘didn’t we’] uttered after the utterance has been completed. Spanish has a number of expressions that use the word ‘soul’ to express emotions and a state of mind. For example “agradezco con toda el alma” or “partir el alma,” in both cases English prefers to use heart instead of ‘soul’ as in ‘thanks from the bottom of my heart’ and ‘breaks one’s heart’. Following this idea an alternative translation could have been to **‘cheer them with all our heart’** instead of simply ‘cheer for them’.

The second utterance under analysis “*Ehh! y fue espantoso para nosotros fue eso madre mía...*” is composed of three discourse markers: “*Ehh!*” [lit. ‘Oh!’] an interjection which, being placed at the beginning of the utterance, plays the role of preparing the listeners for what they are going to hear. “*Fue espantoso*” [lit. ‘it was awful’], a descriptive adjective accompanied by the preterite that evaluates (Labov 1972) a precise past event and the tragedy of the time, and the expression “*madre mía*” [lit. ‘Oh my God!/good God!’] concludes the utterance and emphasizes the profound feelings of the narrator when the news of invasion of Russia by the fascists is given. The translation provided in the subtitling ‘It was such a shock for us’ does not encapsulate the three discourse markers.

Example 6 (Extract 5) shows the memories of the departure from Spain of two siblings who were taken by their mother and sister to the ship that would take them to Russia.

“*Y los estoy viendo ahora las estoy los estoy viendo ese cuadro ahora como subían por las escaleras del de del barco éste el correo este famoso que había que llevaba tal y se volvieron ellos y con las manitas nos hacían adiós,adiós...*”

‘I’m seeing that picture **right** now. I can see them going up the stairs of the ship, the famous mail boat that would carry... Then they turned around and we could see them **waving us goodbye...**’

The first utterance “*los estoy viendo ahora las estoy los estoy viendo*” [lit: ‘I’m seeing them, now I’m, I’m seeing them’] show a repetition of the progressive form of the verb to be + the verb to see conjugated in the first person singular and the adverb of time “ahora” ‘now’ used in between the verb forms to provide a descriptive picture of the narrated event. Both the repetition of verb forms and the adverb of time reveal the strong emotional state of mind of the narrator who brings to life her past experience to the present time –“ahora” ‘now’. The repetition depicts the narrator’s strong feeling of despair and sadness reinforced by her tone of voice as well.

Similarly, the subtitle misses the emotional attribute attached to the repetition of “*adiós adiós*” [lit. ‘good bye, good bye’] which is accompanied by “*con las manitas*” [lit: ‘with their little hands’]. The description of how small the children’s hands were intended to convey the idea of fragility, smallness and even innocence by the use of the diminutive “-ita” at the end of the noun. ‘Waving us goodbye’ then does not fully encapsulate the age factor or the emotion of the event.

In the latter description of the young children waving good bye it is possible to argue that what has been left out in the subtitling can be captured in the visual image of the film, which is the case. Nevertheless, the inclusion of linguistic strategies that would provide



similar illocutionary force to the original text would not affect the translated version but enrich the text. For example an alternative might have been:

‘I’m seeing that picture **right** now it’s so vivid. I can see them going up the stairs of the ship, the famous mail boat that would carry... Then they turned around and we could see them **waving us goodbye with their tiny hands/waving bye bye...**’

Continuing the idea of repetition and the illocutionary effect of the original text, it is possible to identify some examples where the subtitler has avoided repeating the same word and has offered a translation that maintains the original illocutionary force. This point will be the focus of a future study on audiovisual translations in documentaries.

### 3. DISCUSSION

One central question regarding condensation in film subtitling is whether condensation is an automated response to repetitions, unclear or redundant verbal features or whether it responds to more specific aims. Let’s take the examples of those utterances that did not fully convey speakers’ states of mind of distress, fear and anger.

If we were to argue that the *skopos* of translating emotional expressions was to assimilate the intended illocutionary force of the text for the target Australian audience by means of domesticating and adapting the text (Agost 1999) then we are implying that expressions of emotions may differ in their occurrence, frequency and intensity in Peninsular Spanish and Australian English.

Although this proposition may be true, following previous studies in cross-cultural pragmatics between Spanish and English speakers on speech realization (Blum Kulka *et al.* 1987), the translations that have been provided in this manuscript as alternative texts indicate otherwise. Therefore, the failure of conveying similar illocutionary effects in the subtitles appears not to be conditioned by the language “deficiency”, but might be due to external language factors like the time and space limits that restrain audio-visual translations. This hypothesis could explain why repetition of articles, prepositions, verbal forms, nouns among other grammatical features is avoided regardless of the illocutionary force attached to the original text. Nonetheless, I have shown in this study that treating all repetitions as redundant verbal features may lead to misrepresentation of speakers’ states of mind and miss the subtleties and nuances associated with the oral discourse, thus producing an impoverished version of the original text (Remael 2004: 105).

It is not my intention here to advocate for equivalence<sup>3</sup> in the strict sense of the word and deprive the translators of their visibility, but it is my desire to make the potential audience aware of the illocutionary force attached to the spoken discourse. Speakers’ recounting of their stories during their childhood in Russia bring to surface memories of distress, fear and anger that constitute an integral part of who they are today as adults.

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<sup>3</sup> Newmark considers equivalence as a ‘a common academic dead-end pursuit’ (1991: 3) and Chamizo realises the importance of providing an interpretation of a sentence when the original text does not clearly convey an idea.

A partial interpretation of their emotions or absence thereof may lead the audience to not fully comprehend their individual experiences.

It could be argued that visual images and participants' tone of voice and facial expressions could compensate for the absence of subtitles that refer to emotional expressions. Having both the visual images and the written discourse simultaneously may help the audience to fill the gaps left in the subtitling.

Although in some language-pairs the cultural gap is not so far apart to make the audience misinterpret the paralinguistic features in regards to emotional state of mind (e.g. Spanish v/s Italian) this reasoning cannot be extended to every language-pair (e.g. Spanish v/s Vietnamese) where for example smiling is used as a way to show embarrassment in contrast to the friendly attitude meant to achieve in Spanish.

If we were to take the position that we can leave out those utterances that denote a state of mind in the subtitling because the visual images can contribute to the overall meaning, then we are in thorny territory by taking for granted the complexity of universal human expressions of emotions, beliefs and moral attitudes. As suggested by Wierzbicka (1992), there are clear "culture-specific configurations" in the way we convey our emotions and interpret others.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Since condensation is not an option in subtitling but a requirement, the text should be analysed at different discourse levels, before attempting a translation, to gain a full understanding of the internal structures that constitute a socio-cultural text. In this process the illocutionary force of the utterances should emerge and the decision to omit, condense or alter linguistic features be evaluated, as they may result in turning the attention of the viewer to other features of the text that may carry less weight in the discourse.

The importance of analysing the source text in the process of translating the text has been the interest of Nord (1991) in translation-oriented ST analysis and Trosborg (1997, 2002) in discourse analysis for translation. Although Trosborg's model<sup>4</sup> has been a point of contention for many scholars (see Schäffner 2002) in Translation Studies due to the detailed ST analysis required before working on the translation, it could be said that the identification of speakers' psychological states of mind and attitudes towards events (i.e. expressives), as for the characters of a documentary like *The Children of Russia*, may have assisted subtitlers in their decision process when dealing with repetitive linguistic features and emotional utterances (see previous examples).

It is expected that discourse analysis and textual analysis will play a role in the process of familiarization of the source text and the production of the target text. This practice will complement the method of 'translation/adaptation-spotting' where

in an ideal scenario a translator translates and adapts a film which is then spotted by someone whose first language is the source language to identify translation errors, finally undergoing the two stage check performed by someone without source text knowledge, to pinpoint unclear or incoherent translation." (Sánchez 2004: 17)

<sup>4</sup> Many scholars would argue that Anna Trosborg offers an approach to translation instead of a model. See Schäffner 2002.

It is my hope that the incorporation of this approach will establish audio-visual translation as the focus of the academic enquiry that it deserves, and will assist audiences in gaining a deeper appreciation of translated texts.

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