

By Editors Posted July 2, 2023 In Issue 1/2023

Introduction

All over the world, we find bilingual communities where people share not only two common languages, but geographical, historical, political, sociological and linguistic variabilities that determine their way of speaking and expressing themselves. In fact, having two languages cohabitating in the same territory can result in a mixing of those languages, resulting in a new mixed language being created when people in that area communicate with each other. Professionals in the field therefore often speak about “code-switching”, when speakers use two different languages within a sentence or several sentences or utterances, and “code-mixing”, when speakers use individual words from another language. This creates this a mixed language when people are speaking in a spontaneous way.

Considering that no language is uniform, given its variabilities and communicational context, how should language professionals deal with code-switching? What determines how these forms should be reflected when translating the spoken language?

To correct or not to correct: communication in context

Composed of three main cities (València, Castellón and Alicante) and having València as its homonymous capital, the Valencian region has Spanish and Valencian as its official languages. For this reason, people tend to speak both languages indistinctly regardless of the context. In addition, speakers naturally use different types of register or style. Valencian television has adopted guidelines (Valencian Media Corporation, 2021) with a Valencian linguistic reference model. In terms of the variabilities found in a language, the guidelines show how to subtitle according to context and register. The language used in subtitling depends on the contextual features, such as the speaker and the type, aim and characteristics of the product. Because of this, the same sentence can be adequate in one context but not adequate in another context.

Let us take the expression *uelo* (a fairly common yet not normative word for *grandpa* in Valencian) as an example. In a documentary about how youngsters live today in the downtown area, this term would be deemed normal if pronounced by a 16-year-old boy, but the same term would sound odd if it was uttered in the Christmas speech by the president of the Generalitat, who might instead say *iaio* or *avi* — the entries found in the dictionary — instead of *uelo*. The question, therefore, is whether we should always refer back to the context, as indicated in the Valencian guidelines or, rather, to ask ourselves whether or not this is always needed.

Dealing with code-switching and code-mixing in live subtitling

According to the Valencian television guidelines, professionals should avoid the use of unnecessary foreign words. However, the guidelines also indicate that spontaneity and expressivity can blur the lines between formal and informal contexts. This can transform those unnecessary foreign words into “acceptable forms”, even if they are still recommended to be avoided. For this reason, the foreign words can be repeated or, conversely, adapted and corrected according to the context, the audiovisual product and the register; for instance, from *uelo* to *abuelo* (the Spanish word from which *uelo* comes) and to *iaio* or *avi*).

When it comes to live subtitling, we talk about a change from the oral (that is, the speech) to the written code (that is, the subtitles). The guidelines indicate that the standard language is the Valencian reference model, because standard language is easier to understand; it is supposed to be the neutral version of our language and is accessible to every user. In addition, users with any type of hearing loss have needs that differ from those of the general audience: sound effects (i.e., explosions, telephone ringing, audience cheering), contextual information (i.e., irony, laughter, crying, a foreign accent) and readability (i.e., the ease with which the reader understands a written text) should be considered in order to make subtitles accessible. Therefore, in order to guarantee accessibility, the needs of the audience should prevail.

Normally, for the purposes of subtitling, code-switching tends to be neutralised, with the original utterances being translated into just one language. For example, “Això no m’ho dius *en la calle*”, which literally means, “You would not dare to say that in the street” in a mixture of Valencian at the start of the sentence and Spanish (in italics) at the end, would be changed to “Això no m’ho dius al carrer”, which has the same meaning, but uses only Valencian. In the case of a foreign word being used to express an emphasis that would lose its meaning if it were translated, quotation marks or italics are used for that foreign word to reflect the meaning coming from the other language, such as with the word *déjà vu*, for instance. Would it not be strange to try to reformulate this term in English? Is it not easier to just write *déjà vu*?

Concluding remarks

As this article demonstrates, language has several implications and limitations that determine its form, its adequacy and its acceptance in different contexts. As a result, further research is advisable in order to observe how bilingual contexts and users can change — or not — ways of communication. When it comes to subtitling in the Valencian context, reception studies should be conducted and professional practices taken into account in order to improve subtitling quality and accessibility for users, audiences and speakers.

Luz Belenguer Cortés is a live subtitler and an audiodescriptor in the Valencian tv station À Punt Mèdia and an associate lecturer at Universitat Jaume I, Spain.

Reference

Corporació Valenciana de Mitjans de Comunicació (2021). *Llibre d'Estil de la Corporació Valenciana de Mitjans de Comunicació*. Guidelines of the Valencian media corporation.

URL: https://www.cvmc.es/wp-content/uploads/Llibre-destil-CVMC-2021_25_05_2021.pdf