

## Dubbing a TV Drama Series

### The Case of The West Wing

By Frederic Chaume (Universitat Jaume I, Spain)

#### Abstract & Keywords

##### English:

The Spanish dubbing of *The West Wing* has been acknowledged as one of the best dubbings of a TV drama series in Spain. This article focuses on the dubbing of Episode #10 from *The West Wing* (1999), entitled “In Excelsis Deo”, a Christmas special episode brimming with cultural references, intertextual references, register switchings, close-ups, and all the ingredients that are usually accounted for in dubbing. This study shows an analysis of the quality of dubbing in just one episode of this mainstream American TV series dubbed into Spanish. In order to do so, a qualitative analysis according to the episode’s adherence to a checklist of dubbing standards, compiled in Chaume (2012), but taken from some other authors (Whitman-Linsen, 1992, among others), has been carried out.

**Keywords:** audiovisual translation, dubbing, multimedia translation

---

#### Introduction

The Spanish dubbing of *The West Wing* has been acknowledged as one of the best dubbings of a TV drama series in that country (<http://laciudadorada.blogspot.com.es/2010/08/doblajes-y-otra-vez-si-wire.html>, <http://www.mediavida.com/foro/82/the-west-wing-ala-oeste-casa-blanca-383793>, <http://www.rebeldemule.org/foro/tv/tema8134.html>, etc.). All seasons were dubbed in Soundtrack (Barcelona), later known as Soundub, and recently acquired by the international company SDI Media, a firm that bought the four Soundub branches in the Iberian peninsula (Madrid, Barcelona, Santiago de Compostela and Lisbon). DVDs distributed in Spain include both the dubbed and subtitled versions of the seven seasons, as well as the usual extra contents.

TV drama series occupy an important share of many TV stations’ listings, and some of them have conquered both film critics and the audience as a quality production. This is the case of *The West Wing* ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_West\\_Wing](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_West_Wing)). TV series have also recently aroused the interest of researchers in Audiovisual Translation (AVT) with more and more case studies under scrutiny: Herbst (1994), Fuentes Luque (1997/8), Zhao (2002), Bucaria (2007), Baños-Piñero and Chaume (2009), Romero Fresco (2006), (2007) and (2009), Quaglio (2009), which can be added to TV cartoon series which imitate this fiction genre: Martínez Sierra (2008), Botella (2010).

This article focuses on the dubbing of Episode #10 from *The West Wing* (1999), entitled “In Excelsis Deo”, a Christmas special episode brimming with cultural references, intertextual references, register switchings, close-ups, and all the ingredients that are usually accounted for in dubbing. This episode is the stereotypical candidate to teach dubbing in a classroom, as will become clear in the conclusions after a checklist of dubbing standards is presented and validated. The article could be expanded to consider how the dubbing of Episode #10 compares with other dubbed series in Spain, in order to make a systemic comparison among other similar products, but due to the characteristics of the commission the analysis needs to be restricted to just one episode.

#### 1. Dubbing TV Series

To date, the AVT literature has established a rather simplistic distinction between dubbing and subtitling countries. Especially after the advent of the DVD, one cannot speak about only dubbing and subtitling countries anymore. While it is true that many countries stick to a predominant mode on their screens, most dubbing countries also increasingly do subtitling, and many subtitling countries do dubbing. Not only are cartoons for younger children dubbed around the globe, but there is also an interesting upward trend in dubbing TV series in traditional subtitling countries: Portugal, Denmark and Norway are beginning to dub some teen TV series and teen pics (Chorão 2013; Tveit 2009), and Turkish and South American soap operas are also now dubbed in Greece and in the Arab world.

In Spain, and in most dubbing countries, TV series are generally dubbed, although another interesting upward trend is observed in the replacing of dubbing by voice-over in some productions addressed to teenagers – especially on MTV, in Spain, with well-known examples such as *A Shot at Love with Tila Tequila* (2007-2008), maybe the first reality to be voiced-over on Spanish screens, up to *Man vs. Food* (2008-), for example. Technically speaking, dubbing consists of replacing the original track where any audiovisual text's source language dialogues are recorded with another track on which translated dialogues have been recorded in the target language. The remaining tracks are left untouched.

Dubbing TV drama series is nowadays associated with quality production, as films have always been. Canonical and cult TV series are considered to have a similar status to art house movies (*Lost* 2004-2010, *The Mentalist* 2008-2015, *The Sopranos* 1999-2007, *The Office* 2005-2013, *Modern Family* 2009, to mention just a few). TV series which have been a success in the US (and to a lesser extent in the UK) are introduced amid much hype on most TV stations around the world. Dubbing these series is then a matter of prestige for dubbing companies. If one takes a look at some Spanish dubbing companies' web pages, one can immediately notice whether they have been involved with these dubbings, because they are ostentatiously highlighted on their website. TV drama series are considered to be canonical, both because of their success in the US (or the UK) and because of their share ratings in the target culture. Thus, dubbing these series gives prestige to dubbing companies and raises confidence in prospective clients. And this also means that every effort will be made to produce a dubbing according to the prevailing norms of the target culture.

## 2. Dubbing *The West Wing* into Spanish

The many agents involved in the postproduction process of dubbing are a factor that should be taken into account when looking at dubbing, as what is presented to the audience is not the responsibility of one single person: producers, film directors, distributors, TV stations, dubbing directors, voice talents, sync assistants, dialogue writers and, last but not least, translators, can have a say in a dubbing. In the case of *The West Wing*, the Spanish dubbing was carried in Soundtrack (now SDI Media), the translation was carried out by Ricard Sierra, the dialogue writer was José Luis Porrás, and the dubbing director was José Luis Campos. Ernesto Aura, Juan Antonio Bernal, Juana Beuter, and Jordi Ribes, among others, have been the voice talents in Spanish.

## 3. The analysis

Texts – original or translated – are produced according to certain rules or genre conventions within a specific culture and time. In any text, the absence of an expected element may be received by the reader as a negative mechanism. In Translation Studies terminology we usually put it another way: translations are subject to norms. Lip-synching, natural dialogues, coherence between text and image, loyalty to the original text, good acting by voice talents, and a fair sound quality are considered to be the norms guiding canonical dubbings. The lack of lip-synch or isochrony in dubbed films or TV series in a tradition in which synchrony is normative or regulated, the writing of non-credible unrealistic dialogue lines, the lack of coherence between text and images in a dubbing, a noticeable detachment from the meaning of the original version, bad acting on the part of voice talents, and poor sound quality, are all aspects that may turn a dubbed product into a commercial fiasco. Lotman (1982:125) christened this concept with the term 'minus-mechanism', although particularly with reference to literary texts. For example, the absence of rhyme in a genre where it would conventionally be present would be a minus-mechanism. In the same way, the macro-genre of audiovisual translated texts also has a specific canon. Translated audiovisual genres (films, television series, cartoons or documentaries) should follow certain specific conventions that help audiences recognise them, and watch them in a particular way, thereby maximising their success.

This article analyses Episode #10 of the TV series *The West Wing* according to the aforementioned quality standards in dubbing. However, it is not easy to reach a consensus on a list of quality standards, since they will inevitably be subjective. A particular dubbing may work well for some and be a failure for others. A comparison with similar AV products would make the outcomes of this article much more interesting, since these standards could have been checked in a broader corpus. Nevertheless, the analysis of just one episode of this series was the objective of this project.

No empirical evidence has shown what a good dubbing is. The following list of dubbing standards is, then, a tentative proposal and is based on the list presented in Chaume (2012: 14-20).

### 3.1 Lip-synch

Matching the translation with the onscreen actors' mouth articulation (lip-synch) and body movements (kinesic synchrony), and especially matching the duration of the original actor's utterances and pauses with the translation (isochrony) is considered to be a cornerstone of dubbing; in other words, compliance with synchronization norms is mandatory. We might therefore state that a fine red line is crossed when the length of the translation does not match the duration of the dialogue lines uttered by the screen actor or actress. Also, a good dubbing will show a fine lip-synch in close-ups, extreme close-ups and detailed lip shots. However, other lip and even other kinesic synchronies do not break this tacit agreement, despite Fodor's insistence in his pioneering 1976 study. Fodor advocates replacing bilabial consonants with bilabial consonants, labio-dental consonants with labio-dental consonants, and even rounded vowels with rounded

vowels. He also recommends that the dubbing actor should imitate the gestures of the screen actor in order to come as close as possible to the original as far as verbal mimicry is concerned. Fodor's study (1976:32-36) compares the mouth movements of various languages, inhaling and exhaling and head movements but, with the exception of close-ups, extreme close-ups or detailed lip shots, norms described in the professional contexts of European dubbing countries show that his approach is somewhat exaggerated and his advice is not followed in professional practice.

In Episode 10 of *The West Wing*, isochrony is an absolute priority. All dialogues are finely substituted by Spanish dialogues lasting exactly the same time. Of special interest are close-ups, which have most definitely been translated according to the canon, as far as isochrony is concerned. The close-up of Mrs. Landingham, the mother who lost her twins in Vietnam, is portentous. All sentences and all pauses match her lips perfectly, and this contributes to creating and maintaining the suspension of disbelief so characteristic of dubbing. These sentences are an example of how the duration of Spanish and English sentences is kept the same:

<i>English Version</i>	<i>Spanish Dubbed Version</i>
You know, they were so young, Charlie	Sabes, eran tan jóvenes, Charlie
They were your age	Tenían tu edad
It's hard when that happens so far away	Es algo muy duro cuando eso pasa tan lejos
Because with the noises and the shooting, they had to be scared	Porque con las bombas y los disparos, debían de estar muy asustados
It's hard to think that, right then, they needed their mother	Es duro pensar que justo cuando necesitaban a su madre...

**Table 1. Isochrony between length of English and Spanish sentences**

As far as lip-synch is concerned, as we know, only labial consonants (including bilabials and labiodentals) and maybe open vowels are looked for in the translation, so that words containing these consonants and vowels replace their counterparts in the original version. Obviously, due to the systemic linguistic differences in a language pair, instead of looking for coined equivalents containing the same consonants – something that is not always possible – translators play with words, and change word order, so that labial consonants appear in the dubbing exactly in the same place where the onscreen actor utters them in the original language. These sentences also prove that lip-synching is a priority in dubbing:

<i>English Version</i>	<i>Spanish Dubbed Version</i>
I <b>begged</b> them <b>but</b> they wanted to go	Su <b>p</b> adre y yo les <b>s</b> uplicamos
It's hard when that <b>happens</b> so <b>far</b> away	Es algo <b>muy</b> duro cuando eso <b>p</b> asa tan lejos
<b>B</b> ecause with the noises and the shooting, they had to <b>b</b> e scared	<b>P</b> orque con las bombas y los disparos, debían de estar <b>muy</b> asustados
It's hard to think that, right then, they needed their <b>m</b> other	Es duro pensar que justo cuando necesitaban a su <b>m</b> adre...

**Table 2. Lip-synch between labial consonants in English and Spanish sentences**

The first example is proof of how creative a translator or a dialogue writer can be. The first bilabial, /b/, is substituted by another bilabial /p/, from “padre”, a word that is not in the original text. The translator, or the dialogue writer, has added this information (it is their mother who begged the twins not to go to the war), but it does not betray the meaning of what is explained in that sequence. Although it was the mother who told her twins not to go to the war, the translator, or the dialogue writer, prefers to say that both their father and mother did, simply because adding the word “father” (“padre”) provides a bilabial in the exact place where the English bilabial /b/ (in “begged”) was. At the same time, it is easy to check that labial consonants rotate, i.e. translators play with all bilabials (/m/ /b/ /p/) and labiodentals (/f/ /v/) to find a good option in the target text. Therefore, the word “far” is substituted by the word “pasa” (“happens”) at exactly the same place, just because “pasa” has a bilabial consonant. Or the verb “be” is substituted for the intensifier “muy” (“very”) for the same reason.

However, this is not usual in TV drama series, and especially in *The West Wing*, because, on the one hand, there are many (interior) shots against the light and also, close-ups, extreme close-ups and detailed shots of the lips are not the usual types of shots in this series. On the contrary, medium shots and knee-shots (Hollywood shots) are largely preferred. In these shots, lip-sync is not mandatory, and translators and dialogue writers only take isochrony into account, which still has to be complied with. But another striking characteristic of this TV series also reduces the importance of isochrony: most of the time characters talk while they walk. To keep the attention of the audience and to make the series more dynamic and less

boring, directors have decided to use a kind of talk-and-go process through all the episodes. It means that the camera has to follow the actors and actresses while they walk, and it also implies that the camera cannot always focus on the characters' mouths and faces. Therefore, isochrony is not always a constraint in the translation. Nevertheless, when it is, the result has been solved according to the canon, i.e. always matching translated sentences with the onscreen characters' articulatory movements – as far as dialogues and silences are concerned.

### 3.2 Credible and realistic dialogue lines

The writing of credible and realistic dialogues, of speech naturalness (Romero-Fresco, 2009), emulating the oral registers of the target language, sometimes involves trespassing the limits of language usage, something which is also a desirable general objective in any translation (such as, for example, avoiding structural and lexical calques in the translation). Translation oscillates between two poles: its adequacy in relation to the source text and its acceptability in the target culture. In the case of translation for dubbing, another key to good dubbing quality is to ensure that the target language sounds realistic, credible, and natural; i.e., dialogues must sound natural in order not to take us away from the storyline. That is to say, the translation must be acceptable according to the canonical standards (norms) of an audiovisual text translated into the target language as far as dialogues and turn-taking are concerned. The aim of achieving the above mentioned suspension of disbelief, or the positive disposition of the audience to ignore the limitations of the medium, must be attained by using an oral register that can be defined as false spontaneous, prefabricated speech (Chaume, 2012; Taylor, 1998). This is not only an issue in dubbing and subtitling; in film production one of the most widespread criticisms of some films is the artificiality of their dialogues.

In our episode, we can easily agree with the idea that target dialogues are credible and natural. There are some good excerpts of register matching and natural short sentences:

<i>English Version</i>	<i>Spanish Dubbed Version</i>
I mean it	Va en serio
No, man	No, tío
Sure	Claro
Sam was a reluctant accomplice	Sam lo ha hecho a regañadientes

**Table 3. Examples of natural dialogues in Spanish (colloquial register)**

Even with high registers, when needed:

<i>English Version</i>	<i>Spanish Dubbed Version</i>
the least embarrassment and turmoil	el menor bochorno y alboroto
your absence in the other room is conspicuous	su ausencia [...] empieza a notarse

**Table 4. Examples of natural dialogues in Spanish (formal registers)**

These examples show how the translator and the dialogue writer know how to emulate oral discourse: when needed, they substitute colloquial words and phrases for colloquial words and phrases in Spanish (*va en serio*; *no, tío* are really good examples of colloquial register in Spanish). But when needed, they can also imitate cultivated registers too, with words that belong to high registers in Spanish, or even to written discourse, like *bochorno y alboroto*. These words would not sound natural in colloquial exchanges – as turmoil does not either in English – but they do sound appropriate in this situation, both because the situation requires them and because they are equivalents to the English term in terms of register.

There are, however, examples of register mismatching as well:

<i>English Version</i>	<i>Spanish Dubbed Version</i>
I've got a crush on you (colloquial)	porque me gustas (standard)
dial it down (colloquial)	suavices (formal)
a hooker (slang)	una puta (taboo)

**Table 5. Examples of register mismatching**

Whereas the two first examples show a lower register in English (*crush* and *dial down*, compared to *gustas* and *suavices* respectively), the third one shows a taboo word in Spanish (*puta*), where the English used a slang word (*hooker*). Maybe unintentionally, this can balance the final result in terms of tenor of discourse.

Nevertheless, one can also find examples of calques throughout the episode. Some of them are listed in the following table:

<i>English Version</i>	<i>Spanish Dubbed Version</i>
How about a big “Good Morning, Mr. President” when he comes in?	¿Qué tal un gran “Buenos días, Sr. Presidente” cuando entre en la sala?
That sounded weak to me	Eso me ha parecido muy <b>suave</b> (instead of <i>eso suena muy bajito</i> )
It’s hard when that happens so far away	Es algo muy duro cuando eso pasa tan lejos
You a veteran?	¿Es usted <b>un</b> veterano?
I’m gonna ignore your list	Voy a <b>ignorar</b> tu lista
I should get dressed now	<b>Ahora</b> tengo que vestirme
Oh, jeez!	¡Oh, vaya!

**Table 6. Examples of syntactic and lexical calques**

These examples show phrases and sentences that sound awkward in Spanish. The use of articles where they are not needed (*un veterano*), the syntactic calques, which can be understood, but are totally unnatural in the target language (*ahora tengo que vestirme* for simply *voy a vestirme*; *es algo tan duro cuando eso pasa lejos* for *es más duro cuando encima pasa lejos*; *Qué tal un gran “Buenos días, Sr. Presidente” cuando entre en la sala* instead of *Le podéis decir: “Buenos días, Sr. Presidente” cuando entre en la sala*), the lexical calques (*ignorar, suave*) remind the analyst of the fact that this is a dubbing, and dubbing (and translation in general) unavoidably permits the original language to meld with the target language. It is part of translation itself, and only prescriptive eyes would condemn these calques. Obviously, teachers must teach how to write in their target languages without calques, and research can help us know what to avoid, but calques form part of this prefabricated discourse which is an inherent part of dubbing (and of translation in general), and those who know what professional practice is like, also know that this will always happen. And, in fact, it is part of the discourse of dubbing, part of the so-called dubbese, which perhaps is also unconsciously expected in the audience’s minds, or at least, well tolerated when watching a foreign film.

Therefore, prefabricated orality is common to most original and dubbed audiovisual programmes based on a script that is to be interpreted as if it had not been written, especially fictional texts. In the case of dubbing, this prefabricated orality has been termed with the neologism mentioned above: dubbese. The omnipresent dubbese is notorious in this translation as well. Despite the dialogue writer’s skills to avoid a clumsy awkward text, the traces of the original dialogues in the foreign language can always be perceived in the translation.

Constraints on dubbing and subtitling at times involve sacrificing the grammatical correctness of target text dialogues. Hatim and Mason (1997:78-96) show that in subtitling, interpersonal meaning is usually lost: pragmatic meaning encapsulated in pronouns of address, question tags, phatic elements and hesitations, most of them semantically empty, are lost in translation. However, this need not be the case in dubbing, where there is more space to reproduce all interpersonal features. Few hesitations and false starts are appreciated, as happens in the original version, but phatic elements are abundant:

<i>English Version</i>	<i>Spanish Dubbed Version</i>
Did he? (phatic elements)	¿Ah, sí?
Yeah	Sí
Sure	Claro
All right?	¿Vale?
Really?	¿De verdad?
You know	Ya sabe
It’s a gold fish. Isn’t it? (tag questions)	¿A que sí?
Toby (vocatives)	Toby
C.J.	C.J.
I’m just saying.. (hesitations)	Solo estoy diciendo que...
I tried not...	Intentaba que no...
I have no way of...	No tengo manera de...
I was...	Estaba...
You don’t... you don’t know me (repetition)	Usted... usted no me conoce

**Table 7. Rendering of interpersonal meaning**

### 3.3 Coherence between images and words

It seems obvious that there should be *coherence* between what is heard and what is seen, i.e., between words and images, and likewise, between the plot, on the one hand, and the dialogues, on the other. This means that the target text should be coherent not only from the semantic, but also from the iconographic, or visual, point of view. By keeping the network of conceptual relations in our text, we can guarantee both loyalty to the content of the source text, and an overall understanding of the target text. Dubbed dialogues may be incoherent not only from a linguistic or semantic perspective, but also from an iconic viewpoint. Remael (2000), Díaz Cintas (2003), and Chaume (2004, 2012) present numerous illustrations of how this coherence is threatened by the constraints at work in dubbing and subtitling.

The translator takes the image into account not only as an analogous component that constrains the translation process, but also as an aid to resolving these very restrictions (Martínez Sierra 2008, 2009). Reduction in subtitling and synchronization in dubbing may force the translator to compromise the degree of cohesion in the target text.

Icons are easily identified in this episode (the American flag, the statues dedicated to soldiers, the tombstones, for example), and others are explained even in the source text (the goldfish, the crackers). Titles and captions are also signs belonging to the linguistic code, but conveyed through the visual channel. Whereas linguistic signs transmitted through the acoustic channel are usually dubbed, linguistic signs transmitted through the visual channel tend to be read aloud, at the same time as the title is shown on screen. This is the norm in Spain. Following the norm, titles and captions in the series are read aloud in all cases:

<i>English Version (captions, not read aloud)</i>	<i>Spanish Dubbed Version (read aloud)</i>
In Excelsis Deo	In Excelsis Deo (read aloud in Latin)
Thursday December 23, 7.30 a.m.	Jueves, 23 de diciembre, 7:30 de la mañana
The West Wing	El Ala Oeste de la Casa Blanca

**Table 8. Titles and captions**



IN EXCELSIS DEO

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 23  
7:30 A.M.

**Image 1. Titles and captions**

The translation of the series title might seem striking: *The West Wing* should be translated by *El Ala Oeste*, but most probably the distributor felt that this would mean nothing to the Spanish audience and decided to add an explication, i.e. *de la Casa Blanca* (literally, of the White House). This is another example of the domesticating process so typical of dubbing and videogames. The words in Latin, [*Gloria*] *In Excelsis Deo*, that is, *Glory to God in the highest*, is the title and beginning of a hymn known also as

the Greater **Doxology**, and according to the Roman Catholic Church, these were the words that the angels used to announce Jesus Christ's birth to the shepherds. Since this is Latin (closer to Spanish) and belongs to the Christian tradition, translators appropriately decided to keep it in Latin.

Diegetic linguistic signs, i.e. notices belonging to the story, are not read aloud. The following example shows a notice indicating where the action takes place inside the cemetery, and has not been translated:



**Image 2. Diegetic notices**

### **3.4 A loyal translation**

*Loyalty* or *fidelity* to the source text is a concept challenged in some academic circles today, since the cultural turn has shown that ideology can shape the source text meaning and that the hidden or explicit agenda of the market, institutions, agents involved or even the audience, can completely turn a source product into a totally new one in the target language (Vidal Claramonte, 2009; Richart, 2012). Loyalty, however, is usually understood as fidelity to content, form, function, source text effect, or all or any one of the aforementioned, depending on the job in hand (Nord 2014). It is an *a priori* standard of quality of any audiovisual translation – and of any translation – since consuming the same text in the target language and culture is something taken for granted when consuming a translation. The concepts of loyalty (Nord 1991) and fidelity (Hurtado 1990; Munday 2001) have a long tradition in translation theory. The shift in interest from the source text to the target culture as a reference point in translation assessment has meant that the notion of fidelity has lost ground in the theoretical arena of the discipline, or rather, it is understood as fidelity to the norms governing the target system. However, in general terms, the viewer expects to see the same film that the audience sees in the source language; in other words, that the true story be told in terms of content, and on most occasions, of form, function and effect – and with no censorship.

Interestingly, thresholds of acceptability can once again be noticed in certain settings which would be considered intolerable in others. While the spectator would not consent to changes in the plot and content of an audiovisual work, changes in other areas would be tolerated. These include:

acceptance of *linguistic censorship* and self-censorship – practised to a greater or lesser extent by most television stations and dubbing and subtitling companies, as well as by translators themselves

*mismatched registers* – translations that, because of the inclusion of lexical and structural calques from the source language, sound nowhere near idiomatic; these are particularly overbearing in teen pics and TV series

the astonishing *changes to some film titles*

and even the semiotic distortions caused by the use in the translation of certain characteristic



features of the target culture (*over adaptation*) in a typically foreign atmosphere and place.

Since, as has been stated above, drama series have more or less the same status as art films, censorship is not foreseeable in the translation, and over adaptation is not recommended either. A very good example of this foreignising trend, i.e. of rejecting over adaptation, is found when the translator preferred “Santa Claus”, to translate the name Santa, instead of the more local *Papá Noel*, the most preferred term to refer to Father Christmas in Spanish:

<i>English Version</i>	<i>Spanish Dubbed Version</i>
Who’s playing Santa?	Santa Claus (instead of <i>Papá Noel</i> )
Purple Heart (type of medal)	Corazón Púrpura (type of medal)

**Table 9. Examples of foreignising translation in cultural references**

Nonetheless, the general trend in the series seems to localise as many cultural references as possible. In that sense, we can find two different translation solutions in the target text: either finding an explicitation of the reference, or substituting the reference for a local one. These two possibilities are shown in the following examples:

<i>English Version</i>	<i>Spanish Dubbed Version (explicitation of CR)</i>
Yeah, because of the northeasterly wind off <b>the Chesapeake</b>	El viento del noroeste de <b>la bahía</b>
<b>Moroccan spine</b>	<b>Tapas de cuero de color marrón</b>
<b>Keystone Kops</b> (incompetent fictional <b>policemen</b> , featured in <b>silent film</b> comedies)	<b>Detectives de pacotilla</b>
They hang around <b>Capitol and P</b>	Normalmente suelen estar por <b>la zona norte</b>
Did you know that the recordings of “Feliz Navidad” outsold the recordings of “Merry Christmas”?	¿Sabes que los villancicos en castellano se venden más que los ingleses?
<i>English Version</i>	<i>Spanish Dubbed Version (localisation of CR)</i>
The <b>IRS</b> works for me	<b>Hacienda</b> trabaja para mí
Little Drummer Boy	Cantan el <b>tamborilero</b>

**Table 10. Examples of domesticating translation in cultural references**

Since reception studies are scarce in audiovisual translation, we still do not know which thresholds of acceptability audiences tolerate, and which they reject. Here perhaps, the reviled concept of audiovisual *genre* has its *raison d’être* and will be seen as a useful parameter in defining this threshold: certain audiovisual genres allow what would never be acceptable in others – over adaptation can be found in cartoons more frequently than in TV drama series, lip-synch can be overlooked in cartoons but not so often in TV drama series, etc.

Temperatures are also adapted (83 degrees Fahrenheit has been translated as *28 grados*). And the books that the president is browsing in the shop are also translated:

<i>English Version</i>	<i>Spanish Dubbed Version (localisation of CR)</i>
The Fables of Phaedrus	Las Fábulas de Fedrus (though it is Fedro in Spanish)
The Nature of Things	La Naturaleza de las Cosas

**Table 11. Examples of intertextual references**

One can also notice that the titles of the books are mistranslated. The first one, *The Fables of Phaedrus*, has been translated as *Las Fábulas de Fedrus*, but the famous classical writer is known as Fedro in Spanish. The second one has a mistake both in English and in Spanish, since the actual name of the book is *On the Nature of Things* (*Sobre la naturaleza de las cosas*). These books are only known by people having a classical background, and perhaps both the scriptwriters (and directors) and the translators (or dialogue writers) did not do a thorough research of the names of these books in English and Spanish.

In conclusion, most cultural references are either explained – using a hyperonym or broader term – or they are localised, domesticated, using the equivalent reference in Spanish. Even the term Santa Claus, although sounding foreign, is quite well known and widespread in the target culture.

Mismatched registers have been dealt with above (see 3.2.). But in this section it is mandatory to include mistranslations too. There are just very few of them, something which means that the translation and ulterior dialogue writing has been done carefully:

<i>English Version</i>	<i>Spanish Dubbed Version</i>
I <b>guess</b> there were no enough beds for Walter	No había ninguna cama para Walter (he takes it for granted)
A <b>crime</b> is a crime	Un <b>crimen</b> es un crimen (instead of <i>delito</i> , <i>falta</i> )
President of <b>America</b>	Presidente de <b>América</b> (instead of <i>Estados Unidos</i> , but this mistranslation is usual in Spanish, though)
I need to know if she would <b>divulge</b> the name or names of any influential Republican members of Congress...	Necesito saber si <b>divulgaría</b> (instead of <i>revelaría</i> , <i>filtraría</i> ) los nombres de miembros Republicanos influyentes del Congreso...

**Table 12. Examples of translation errors**

### 3.5 Clear sound quality

Other factors fall outside the control of the translator, the dialogue writer and even the dubbing director. The recording and mixing of the translated dialogues put down by the dubbing actors and actresses also seek to achieve a realistic effect and to fulfil the technical and acoustic conventions that characterize the activity of dubbing, which has become conventional over the years. In the case of a TV drama series like *The West Wing*, and in the case of Spanish dubbing this means that:

dialogues from the original version are never heard, not even in the case of a specific paralinguistic feature, such as a cough (when this happens, the spectator notices and is distracted from the film);

dialogues were recorded in soundproof studios (as with the source text dialogues, in a process known as editing or post-synchronization), so their acoustic quality is extremely good, which enables the dialogues to be appropriately received; notably, there is always an absence of noise and interferences in the final recording, so that the sound that reaches the viewer is as clear as possible;

the volume of the voices is also higher than in normal speech, to facilitate greater comprehension, i.e., there is always a fairly high volume and clear voices with tight articulation;

certain sound effects such as reverberation are used in cases in which the characters have their backs to the camera or are at a distance, to create the effect of a slight echo, etc.

The viewer has been conditioned to accept that s/he is watching a film and that in general, s/he will be listening to voices in stereo and with a clarity alien to real-life situations. Even when characters walk off towards the horizon, we can still hear their voices perfectly and understand what they say. We may be shown a completely dark room at the White House, for instance, but the cinematographic illusion has reached the point where, to a great extent, it is accepted that we are able to distinguish the facial features of all characters in the room, and even see their gestures. There are plenty of examples in this series.

When we enter the cinema, we know that what we are going to see/hear is not exactly real, but rather the language of film, with its grammatical rules and its own particular logic (the aforementioned suspension of disbelief). Clear sound quality is part of this.

### 3.6 Acting

The *performance* and *dramatization* of the dialogues is also beyond the control of the translator and the dialogue writer, although the dubbing director and the voice talents have their say in that phase. Conventionally, dubbing actors and actresses – voice talents – are required to perform in such a way that they sound neither faked (overacted) nor monotonous (underacted). Overacting is without a doubt one of the factors that also cause the viewer to cross this tolerance threshold referred to previously in this article. Voice talents, in their enthusiasm to dramatize the target text dialogues, or perhaps also because of their origins and training in the theatre, sometimes emphasize intonations and pronunciations to such an extent that if we hear a conversation from any big screen or television film, without knowing where the sound is coming from, we immediately know that they are cinema or television dialogues, and not real conversation. Whitman-Linsen explains:

[...] role interpretations are overdone, over dramatic, overladen with emotion. The voices sound phony and theatrical and out of keeping with body expression. Everyday conversations are enacted as if they were dealing with tragic deaths of family members and the outbreak of atomic wars. *People just do not speak like dubbers seem to imagine they do.* Whether aimed at over- or underacting, the criticism is often justified (Whitman-Linsen 1992:47, my emphasis).

Neither overacting nor underacting is the case in *The West Wing*. Dramatization is done in a very professional way, which is particularly common in drama series and art films. An adequate performance is

more easily achievable by ensuring the oral register is realistic in the dialogues. Indeed, the ultimate aim of dubbing is to create a believable final product that seems real, that tricks us as viewers into thinking we are witnessing a credible story, with easily recognised characters and realistic voices. As voices in the industry state: “Good dubbing today looks like the story was recorded in the language you hear” (Wright and Lallo 2009: 219).

The rendering of phonetic performance is impeccable, as occurs with dubbing in general – although in this case, the original does not allow itself features of colloquial pronunciation either.

One striking feature of Spanish dubbing (and of dubbing, in general), is that foreign names are hispanized, as far as phonetics is concerned. Thus, English phonemes which do not exist in Spanish are substituted by Spanish phonemes – sometimes allophones – resembling those phonemes. But the result is really astonishing, since what we hear is the typical Spanish pronunciation of English words. In this line, for example, New Hampshire is pronounced as /nú xampfi/, and Andrew is pronounced /a:ndrju/, in a Spanish-like fashion.

This study shows an analysis of the quality of dubbing in just one episode of a mainstream American TV series dubbed into Spanish. Inevitably, a quality assessment always implies a subjective viewpoint. In order to avoid this, a qualitative analysis according to the episode’s adherence to a checklist of dubbing standards, compiled in Chaume (2012), but taken from some other authors (Whitman-Linsen, 1992, among others) and from personal experience in professional practice, has been carried out. This analysis can then be replicated.

In general terms, in this episode we are faced with a domesticating dubbing, which keeps some cultural references from the original culture, and which sounds awkward as far as dialogues are concerned sometimes, but which shows a perfect lip-synch, a canonical isochrony, many explicitations and even cultural adaptations to make the plot understood, a neat sound quality, magnificent acting, a loyal translation with very few and irrelevant errors, fresh dialogues and a high level of coherence between what we see and what we hear. In general terms, it corresponds to standard practice in Spain, but this dubbing particularly stands out for its superb acting, fresh dialogues and perfect isochrony, as seen in the analysis. A canonical outcome which can be – and is – considered as a high-quality dubbing according to Spanish dubbing standards.

## References

- Baños-Piñero, Rocío, and Frederic Chaume (2009) “Prefabricated Orality. A Challenge in Audiovisual Translation”, *Intralinea. Online translation journal* 6.
- Botella, Carla (2010) *El intertexto audiovisual y su traducción: referencias cinematográficas paródicas en Family Guy*, PhD diss., Universidad de Alicante, Spain.
- Bucaria, Chiara (2007) “Humour and other catastrophes: dealing with the translation of mixed-genre TV series”, *Linguistica Antverpiensia*, 6: 235-254.
- Chaume, Frederic (2004) *Cine y Traducción*, Madrid, Cátedra.
- (2012) *Audiovisual Translation: Dubbing*, London and New York, Routledge.
- Chorão, Graça (2013) *A Dobragem em Portugal: Novos Paradigmas na Tradução Audiovisual*, PhD diss., Universidade de Vigo, Spain.
- Díaz Cintas, Jorge (2003) *Teoría y práctica de la subtitulación. Inglés-español*, Barcelona, Ariel Cine.
- Fodor, István (1976) *Film Dubbing: Phonetic, Semiotic, Esthetic and Psychological Aspects*, Hamburg, Helmut Buske.
- Fuentes Luque, Adrián (1997/8) “La traducción de los títulos de películas y series de televisión”, *Sendebarr* 8/9: 107-114.
- Hatim, Basil, and Ian Mason (1997) *The Translator as Communicator*, London, Routledge.
- Herbst, Thomas (1994) *Linguistische Aspekte der Synchronisation von Fernsehserien. Phonetik, Textlinguistik, Übersetzungstheorie*, Tübingen, Niemeyer.
- Hurtado, Amparo (1990) *La notion de fidélité en traduction*, Paris, Didier Erudition.
- Lotman, Yuri (1982) *Estructura del texto artístico*, Madrid, Istmo.
- Martínez Sierra, Juan José (2008) *Humor y traducción. Los Simpson cruzan la frontera*, Castelló de la Plana, Publicacions de la Universitat Jaume I.
- (2009) “The challenge of translating humour for dubbing. Some problematical issues” in *Foreign Language Movies – dubbing vs. subtitling*, Angelika Goldstein and Biljana Golubovic (eds), Hamburg, Verlag Dr. Kovac: 129-149.
- Munday, Jeremy (2001) *Introducing Translation Studies*, London and New York, Routledge.
- Nord, Christiane (1991) *Text Analysis in Translation*, Amsterdam, Rodopi.
- (2014) *Translating as a Purposeful Activity: Functionalist Approaches Explained*, London and New York, Routledge.

- Quaglio, Paulo (2009) *Television Dialogue: The Sitcom Friends vs. Natural Conversation*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins.
- Remael, Aline (2000) *A Polysystem Approach to British New Wave Film Adaptation, Screenwriting and Dialogue*, PhD diss., Leuven, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium.
- Richart Marset, Mabel (2012) *Ideología y traducción. Por un análisis genético del doblaje*, Madrid, Biblioteca Nueva.
- Romero Fresco, Pablo (2006) "The Spanish dubbese. A case of (un)idiomatic Friends", *Jostrans*, 6: 134-151.
- (2007) "Synching and swimming naturally on the side – hesitation in dubbing", *Linguistica Antverpiensia*, 6: 185-202.
- (2009) "Naturalness in the Spanish Dubbing Language: A case of not-so-close Friends", *Meta* 54, no. 1: 49-72.
- Taylor, Christopher (1998) *Language to Language: A Practical and Theoretical Guide for Italian/English Translators*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Tveit, Jan Emil (2009) "Dubbing vs. subtitling: Old battleground revisited" in *Audiovisual Translation. Language Transfer on Screen*, Jorge Díaz Cintas and Gunilla Anderman (eds), Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan: 85-96.
- Vidal Claramonte, María del Carmen África (2009) "A vueltas con la traducción en el siglo XXI", *MonTI*, 1: 49-58.
- Whitman-Linsen, Candace (1992) *Through the Dubbing Glass*, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang.
- Wright, Jean Ann, and M. J. Lallo (2009) *Voice-Over for Animation*, Burlington (MA), Focal Press.
- Zhao, Chunmei (2002) "Translation into Chinese of Film Scripts and Scripts of TV Drama Series – Four Main Conflicting Demands", *Chinese Translators Journal* 32, no.4: 49-51.

## Filmography

- A Shot at Love with Tila Tequila* (Sally Ann Salsano, Riley McCormick, 2007–2008)
- Lost* (**J.J. Abrams**, **Jeffrey Lieber**, **Damon Lindelof**, 2004–2010)
- Man vs. Food* (Dan Kornfeld and Tony Bianco, 2008–)
- Modern Family* (**Steven Levitan**, **Christopher Lloyd**, 2009–)
- The Mentalist* (Bruno Heller, 2008–2015)
- The Sopranos* (David Chase, 1999–2007)
- The Office* (**Greg Daniels**, **Ricky Gervais**, **Stephen Merchant**, 2005–2013)
- The West Wing* (**Aaron Sorkin**, 1999–2006)

---

©inTRAlinea & Frederic Chaume (2016).

"Dubbing a TV Drama Series", *inTRAlinea* Special Issue: A Text of Many Colours – translating The West Wing.

**Permanent URL:** <http://www.intraline.org/archive/article/2194>