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Russian Presence in Georgian Film Dubbing: Scales of Inferiority

In Georgia, a law enacted on January 1, 2011 mandated that all foreign language films possess either Georgian dubbing or subtitling for public film showings. This legal measure was targeted at removing Russian presence in film language, as part of then-President Saakashvili's shift away from alignments with Russia and Russianness in Georgian public cultural life. This article investigates the ideological and institutional dimensions of the creation of a new film dubbing industry in Tbilisi for an audience that was critical of it. Russian technical and artistic expression remained the rubric against which Georgian dubbing was compared. Soviet and Russian forms, which continue to permeate the Georgian social world, have structured expectations about "quality" or "art" in dubbing. Additionally, evaluations of dubbing as a form of linguistic mediation described Georgian language as in a relationship of inferiority with respect to Russian, which has long been linked to high-culture forms of sociotechnical mediation. The emergence of a new film dubbing industry in Georgia draws out a number of contradictions in the ways that the institutional calibration of foreignness inheres in labor, aesthetics, and technical forms. [linguistic mediation, film dubbing, subtitling, Russian, Georgian]

Introduction

I was invited for tea one evening at Giovanni's apartment, centrally located above Rustaveli Avenue in downtown Tbilisi. He was a painter, and had worked for years in the late Soviet period as a live-interpreter for movie showings, specializing in films from Italy. Warm with his family's presence, the apartment was crowded with frames, commissioned paintings, and still-life objects. As we ate pastries and talked, his son stood nearby, painting ethnographic details of clothing on a sprawling map depicting the various populations of Georgia. Giovanni kept a sugary lozenge in his cheek as he detailed his experiences as a live-interpreter. His voice, rich with feeling, had been reduced to a strained hush just above a whisper—a disease of the throat was slowly vanishing the voice with which he had once made a living. Yet this did not dampen Giovanni's spirits, nor did it force him to speak less, painful though every utterance must have been. In a disappearing voice, Giovanni recalled a career that has vanished from Tbilisi.

As a live-interpreter for foreign films, Giovanni's task was to translate films in real-time from Italian into Georgian. He wore headphones, seated in front of a microphone that amplified his voice to the auditorium. The first showing of a film was also the first time he had ever seen it, and without preparation he had to speak the

film across cultural and linguistic borders to an audience of local strangers. *Giovani's* recollections about live film interpretation reveal how film language demonstrations worked when a Georgian language version was needed, but unavailable. The practice of live interpretation was common to the socialist bloc in the 1960s and 1970s (Razlogova 2012). Though the first showing of a film was extremely stressful, *Giovani* said that by the fourth showing it was so dull that he had trouble staying awake. To become more adept at live interpretation, he practiced at home by sitting in front of the television and translating everything aloud.

Finding direct equivalences was not his method—what was more important, he explained, was that the audience “understands” the film. If a joke or insult were made, he would invent something on the spot to convey that illocutionary act. I inquired about his strategy for representing dialects. He responded that he would find some kind of socially meaningful dialect difference in Georgian to represent the different forms of speech in Italian. For example, he might use a Mingrelian accent to contrast with standard Tbilisian Georgian. This is as an *ad lib* formation of an inter-indexical relationship, which Inoue has described as the process by which the “indexical order in one language is transposed into that in another language under certain terms of equivalence” (Inoue 2003:327). Film dubbing encodes decisions about what aspects of the original are essential to re-present—which is to say, which components of the indexical order must be translated or reordered. Beyond crafting an inter-indexical relationship, *Giovani* explained that at times he would depart significantly from the text of the film, drawing attention to himself as translator. For example, during a stretch of dialogue, he managed to have one actor inquire about the score of a soccer game in progress, and to have the other actor provide an update. The audience applauded.

In present-day Tbilisi, the audience is no longer applauding. Such skillful live-interpretation is gone from film showings in Tbilisi. Throughout former President Saakashvili's presidency (2004–2013), most foreign film showings occurred with Russian dubbing. A law was enacted on January 1, 2011 that required that all films have either Georgian dubbing or subtitling. In this article, I describe the institutions, practices, and ideologies about language that undergird audiovisual translation as artistic and technical labor. In particular, I focus on how the Rustaveli/Amirani movie theater and business holdings publically dialogued on Facebook with filmgoers displeased with the “quality” of Georgian dubbing. I supplement audience-response material with the historical positioning of dubbing and subtitling in Georgia, along with an account of institutional and ideological positions with respect to dubbing and subtitling, accessed through formal and informal interviews. Films as artistic, cultural, and economic products are useful for thinking through the ways that the Russian language itself became positioned as a medium through which to experience forms of modernity emanating from the “West.” Attending to institutional networks and public reactions in debates about film language in Russia's periphery moves towards an account of the social infrastructure of audiovisual translation.

For non-Russian peoples living on the territory of the former Soviet Union, the Russian language has long been cast as a window to Europe and beyond. During the Soviet period, films served as cultural commodities that revealed the forms and contents of capitalist elsewhere. Films and their contents arrived to Soviet publics under conditions of mediation, censor, and accommodation.¹ Dubbing is one such crucial form of mediation. The imprint of Russian has endured in Tbilisi in channels of film distribution, as well as ideologies about what is considered “quality” in dubbing or subtitling. Dominant ideologies about what counts as “quality” in film dubbing articulate the capacities and limits of both Russian and Georgian languages. Skillful live interpretation, embodied in *Giovani's* former métier, no longer predominates.² This article explores what has come to take its place.

"Quality" and Scales of Inferiority: Situating Audiovisual Translation

An analysis of Georgian film dubbing contributes to a growing literature on materiality in post-Soviet space by disrupting that the notion that the frame of reference for assessing "quality" emanates from the "West." Russian dubbing practices sculpt the rubric of "quality" even as they are imprinted upon Hollywood films. Describing how evaluations of "quality" in Moscow are emplotted against Western goods, which largely are seen as better, Lemon has pointed out that the attribution of shoddiness no longer falls on a system (socialism), but on a people (Russians) (Lemon 2009:203). This relational concept of "quality" resonates with the hierarchical arrangement observed by Pelksmans in Western Georgia, where the hierarchy of value for foreign goods is articulated such that European goods are above Russian, which are above Turkish (Pelksmans 2006:188). Frederiksen observes analogous consumer practices in Tbilisi, noting that his interlocutor Manana was "caught between the unattainable and the inferior" (Frederiksen 2012:131) in terms of how she assessed the availability of consumer goods—she positively appraised "Western" goods though they were largely unavailable. As material goods, films are peculiar in that they represent material conditions in visual form, but also possess material qualities of their own. Think, for example of how one might appraise the "quality" of a pirated VCR-taped version of *Rambo*, dubbed in a single male voice in Russian. Such an artifact indexes "Westernness" (in content) as well as "Sovietness" (in form) in a fashion that blurs the neatness of singular emanation of "quality." Film dubbing "quality" does not entrap one between unattainability and inferiority, but rather between scales of inferiority—the original, unmediated film is unattainable, and all versions are therefore approximations, expressing degrees of inferiority. Because "quality" is so often the evaluative frame for voicing perceived hierarchies among products, it is worth taking stock of how such hierarchies also incorporate beliefs about language. Unlike other inherently relational evaluatives (like "style" (Irvine 2001)), "quality" necessarily inscribes a hierarchy of value.³

Dubbing and subtitling fall under the more general rubric of audiovisual translation, a designation that has spawned its own literature within translation studies.⁴ In sociolinguistics, scholars have posited "cinematic discourse" (Androutopoulos 2012; Richardson and Queen 2012), or more broadly, "media discourse" (Fairclough 1995), as domains of inquiry. Scholars within linguistic anthropology have addressed the ways in which linguistic ideologies underwrite cinematic representations (Bucholtz 2011; Queen 2004), often within the rubric of linguistic style (Coupland 2007). The problematics of representation, transference, and mediation of linguistic forms are familiar territory for translation theory (Rubel and Rosman 2003; Silverstein 2003; Venuti 2008, 2012). The analytical perspective in this article draws together recent work on linguistic mediation, the anthropology of media, and translation studies to describe the processes by which linguistic code comes to be associated with a communicative medium. We must approach film dubbing and its layers of mediation through technologies, labor, and infrastructure rather than strictly through the frame of languages-in-contact. The so-called cultural turn in translation studies must be twisted further until we have driven through to the plane of infrastructure where human laborers assemble "quality."

Critical studies of media and mediatization have problematized inherited binaries such as production//consumption, sender//receiver, and speaker//audience (Agha 2011; Boyer 2007; Peters 1999). In doing so, they have highlighted the need for ethnographic work attentive to the social world in which media exist as economic, social, and historical processes. Approaching film dubbing and subtitling ideologies as processes of mediation moves towards assessing the evaluative dimensions that underwrite the aesthetic labor of audiovisual translation. One example of work in this vein is Park's description of how subtitling in South Korea encodes the distinction between "good" and "bad" forms of English (Park 2009:149–154). In Park's account, subtitling is a way in which ideologies about varieties of English (and, in turn,

assumptions about linguistic competence) are reinforced. Park demonstrates how subtitling encodes interpretive choices, and hence involves a politics of representation present in all forms of transcription (Ochs 1979; Green et al. 1997). This politics of representation is built on a more fundamental stratum of language choice: that is, the historical and social constraints that make available certain languages for translation. The case of Georgian dubbing invites us to consider how multiple *lingua francas* (Russian and English) are at play in configuring the social value of the Georgian language.

Scholars in anthropology have situated audiovisual translation within large-scale formations like globalization—as drawing out, resolving, or amplifying a local-global tension (Mazzarella 2004). Boellstorff has described “dubbing” as a metaphor for the kind of social relation obtained through these scales of tension (Boellstorff 2003). Durovicová has characterized film dubbing as marking “the fault line between the medium’s absolute mobility (as image, as goods) and its attachment to residual representational forms—in particular language” (Durovicová 2003). Transnational power relations shape the development of translation practices, protocols for linguistic transfer, and the movement of cinematic commodities as material and social products. As Durovicová puts it, the “challenge of translation evolved almost immediately into a gearbox of power through which cinematic flows were regulated, and legitimized” (Durovicová 2010: 94). In the next section, I establish the political circumstances and rationales that precipitated legal measures targeted at removing Russian dubbing in order to give an account of the political economy of language in this gearbox of power.

“Vaccinate them on Western mentality”: Subtitling or Dubbing?

In April 2010, in a so-called *k’atsuri saubari* (man-to-man discussion), then-President Saakashvili explained his plan to promote English-language competence in Georgia. Saakashvili stated that “to transform our society into the European standards, we should ‘vaccinate’ them on Western mentality.”⁵ The metaphor of vaccination was a telling choice: vaccines provide immunity against disease. Against what malady was Georgian society to prepare itself? In Saakashvili’s rhetoric, it was the malady of entropy, of missing out on “progress” measured against European standards, or worse, of stumbling “backward” in the direction of Russia. Georgian society was cast as an organism at risk of falling ill if it were not injected with the proper “Western” attitudes or ways of thinking. The notion that Georgianness itself was vulnerable if not strengthened in some fashion underpinned the way that Georgian language, as a key element in the construction of Georgianness (Amirejibi-Mullen 2011), was configured as always in contrastive interplay with the “international,” “modern,” tongues of elsewhere.

Aside from the ambitious Teach and Learn Georgian (TLG) program, which Saakashvili claimed would eventually bring 10,000 native English speakers to Georgia, another method to administer this “vaccine” on Western thought⁶ was by exposure to foreign languages through film.⁷ Saakashvili explained that “We say no to direct dubbing—we release films only in the original language with Georgian subtitles, so that people get used to the sound of a foreign language.”⁸ Saakashvili’s strategy of eliminating film dubbing in favor of subtitling faced a number of challenges and detractors. For example, Gia Chanturia, Director General, Georgian Public Broadcasting, while speaking at the March 14, 2011 sitting of the GPB Board of Trustees, stated that “[t]he moment a subtitled movie starts our rating immediately drops since the viewers switch to foreign, and mainly Russian channels.”⁹ Subtitling was extremely unpopular, especially in television format.¹⁰ I will discuss subtitling and the explanations for why it is unpopular in Georgia in more detail in a section below.

Saakashvili’s hope was that Georgians would grow accustomed to the sound of foreign speech, and in the process, would passively acquire English language

competence. Television viewers changed channels to avoid subtitles, but movie theater patrons had to either endure the movie theater's linguistic choices or exit the cinema. The majority of moviegoers in Tbilisi were under the age of 18, the age demographic within Georgian society possessing the lowest Russian language competence. At the time of Saakashvili's declaration, the majority of films in Georgia were shown in Russian. Even if we remain agnostic about the claim that passive exposure to the "sound" of English through media can result in widespread competence, it is hard to overlook the fact that the demographic weakest in Russian language competence was nevertheless the very group attending Russian-only film showings without Georgian subtitling or dubbing. To be sure, passive competence does not emerge simply from attending movie theater showings—those who understand and speak Russian typically have a family member with whom they interact in Russian, and/or a source for Russian language discussions, reading materials, and so forth. Saakashvili overestimated the didactic capacity of subtitling and underestimated the frustration and intolerance most Georgians report for reading subtitles. In the process, he targeted movie theaters in particular as a site in which to demote Russian language.

Having Georgians learn English was related to the goal of participating in what Saakashvili termed the *tanamedrove msoplio* ("contemporary world").¹¹ Saakashvili took English language use to be a sign of internationalism, particularly indexing European-ness. This built on the long-standing trope of aspirational European-ness in Georgian intellectual and social life (for the 19th-century roots of this, see Manning 2012). Saakashvili advocated the idea that Georgia as a nation could become more European by moving toward having English as its primary lingua franca. He combatted the Russian presence in Georgia, in part, by focusing on language, rather than the business and social dimensions that have made the enduring presence of Russian in movie theaters possible and successful. He did not address the state of affairs that led to Hollywood films being shown exclusively in Russian in Georgia's movie theaters—Hollywood film distribution to Georgia, for example, continued to be routed through Russia.

In Saakashvili's policy, language emerged as a peculiar kind of infrastructure. Secondary national languages, such as Russian and English, for Saakashvili were simultaneously deeply rooted indications of one's ability to participate in modernity as well as easily changeable surfaces that could be effaced and rewritten within half a decade. It was this built-in contradiction about secondary national languages—as both essential embodiments of culture, and easily mutable—that resulted in the ineffective legislation intended to push Russian language out of movie theaters in Georgia.

But what did becoming "European" mean? Though understandings of "Europe" as a geographic designation may vary, many of the countries of Western Europe rely primarily on dubbing, not subtitling, for foreign film showings (Whitman-Linsen 1992). Thus Saakashvili's policy represented a selective understanding of "European" practices. As anthropologists have pointed out, "Europe" or the "West" is an ideological construction, and not simply a geographical or political designation (Coronil 1996). The ideological construction of the "contemporary world" as "Western" and "European," attainable through English-language competence keys into a host of other concerns about the instability of Georgia and Georgianness. Saakashvili's aspiration to transform Georgia into a "European" country by having citizens read Georgian subtitles while passively soaking up English language audio was out of step with both Georgian realities of media consumption, and also flattened a diversity of European practices. In the next two sections, I will discuss the different ways a variety of social actors evaluated the "quality" of dubbed and subtitled films with reference to the historical and institutional frameworks in which audiovisual translation functions. In particular, I provide examples of how Rustaveli Holdings handled audience displeasure with the "quality" of dubbing. These interactions about "quality" ultimately capitulated to an ideology of Georgian inferiority and Russian superiority in the domain of audiovisual translation.

Dubbing: "Why can't you translate like the Russians?"

The Rustaveli/Amirani movie theater complex and business holdings controls a vast majority of the film-showing market in Georgia. They used the company Bravo Studios for all of their film dubbing and sound engineering concerns. Bravo's position in the market was a relatively new one. When I conducted fieldwork from 2011–2012, Bravo had only been operational in this capacity for two years. They were one of few fully equipped sound studios in Tbilisi, and at that time were still negotiating the terms of acquiring a Dolby license. The law initiated by Saakashvili requiring films to have Georgian dubbing or subtitling effectively made the work of Bravo Studios essential. The contribution of Bravo Studios to contemporary film dubbing in Georgia had not yet stabilized in seamless, successful practices. Debates about film language that emerged during this period demonstrated the linguistic ideology that Russian was most appropriate to the medium of film showings.

In Georgia, film dubbing was primarily state-sponsored during the Soviet era. Now film dubbing is a private industry, with the exception of state-linked groups such as Georgian Public Broadcasting (GPB). A multistaged request process decided which institutions could dub products for television and required interested parties to submit examples of their work, which were appraised by foreign language experts.¹² GPB awarded contracts to independent private studios, normally for the period of one year, on the basis of announced tenders. Studios did all the language-related tasks, including translation and dubbing, providing the ready-to-air material to the GPB. Each television channel handled dubbing and subtitling independently, and those I contacted were reticent to respond to questions about specifics. As a result, the perspective that I present here excludes organizational and institutional dimensions of the practice of translation for television. Instead, I offer an overview of how film dubbing and subtitling in Tbilisi worked for film showings in movie theaters.

One of the most famous film and sound studios in Tbilisi is *kartuli pilmi k'inostudio*, which is emblematic of Soviet era film in Georgia. In 2012 *kartuli pilmi k'inostudio* was awaiting the results of the GPB contract-awarding process. Before I interviewed a manager, Mr. L., my assistant Ele and I toured the facility. The only activity that day was a rock band from Scandinavia recording an album. Mr. L. described the contemporary state of Georgian dubbing as a "morass." In his explanation of why Georgian consumers prefer dubbed films over subtitled films, he reasoned that historically, though film quality improved, subtitling remained the same. He argued that viewers felt a dissonance between the visual display of subtitles and the improving technical quality of the film itself, which caused people to dislike subtitling. Subtitling, in his view, was unchanging and therefore out of sync with newer, high quality visuals. Mr. L. argued that viewers expect a correspondence in visual and auditory "quality," and therefore demanded high quality dubbing that matched the high quality picture. Mr. L. emphasized that the art of voice recording had been lost in contemporary film dubbing.

Dubbing "quality" is thus structured not only by measures such as referential correspondence, audibility of sound track, and lip synchronicity, but also by historically contingent understandings of what "good" dubbed films sound and look like.¹³ The bulk of foreign films arrived in Georgia imprinted with Russian dubbing during the Soviet period, as they continued to do during Saakashvili's presidency. This speaks to the source of expectations about how Russian became associated with "quality" dubbing. Filmgoers and those involved in dubbing frequently lamented the absence of the "art" of dubbing in Georgia, though it was unclear what aesthetic criteria they had in mind. Evaluations of dubbing as a form of linguistic mediation describe the Georgian language as inferior to Russian, which has long been linked to high-culture forms of sociotechnical mediation.

Because of its virtual monopoly on film showings in Tbilisi, Rustaveli/Amirani movie theater complex and business holdings is the most significant institution in



რუსთაველი / ამირანი / აპოლო ბათუმი

ფილმები მხოლოდ ქართულად, ან ორიგინალში
ქართული სუბტიტრებით.

რუსულად ჩვენთან ფილმები აღარ გადის (კანონით
გვეკრძალება)

Figure 1

“Rustaveli / Amirani / Apollo Batumi”

“Films only in Georgian, or in the original with Georgian subtitles.

Films in Russian will no longer be shown at our place (prohibited by law)”

audiovisual translation for public consumption of feature films. In early May 2012, the Rustaveli/Amirani movie theater reported on its Facebook page that it would no longer be showing films in Russian (Fig. 1). Despite this announcement, and the law enacted on January 1, 2011 mandating that all foreign language films possess either Georgian dubbing or subtitling, the Rustaveli/Amirani theater continued to show films in Russian for a variety of practical reasons. First, film dubbing is considerably more expensive, time-consuming, and difficult than film subtitling. Rustaveli/Amirani, in response to the market, and based on its own research, has categorically avoided showing subtitled films. Subtitling is unpopular, in part, because it was not the form of film translation to which Georgians became habituated during the Soviet period when, as mentioned above, they consumed foreign films dubbed in Russian. This Russian dubbing was renowned for being high quality. Foreign films in Georgia, including those originating in the United States, continue to move through distribution channels that carry them through Russia.

The Facebook announcement that Rustaveli/Amirani would no longer show Russian films was followed by heated commentary. This ensuing commentary encapsulated many of the dimensions of the debate about the use of the Russian language in film showings in Georgia and the issue of quality of the translated product. In the Facebook comment thread following this announcement, Rustaveli/Amirani theater was at pains to convince patrons that the level of translation and dubbing into Georgian had improved. “Improvement” itself presupposes previous low quality. Below, I analyze how patrons and producers defined “quality” in an audiovisual translation product, what sources of evidence they drew on, and how discourses about language and quality mediated the reception of transnational artistic and entertainment film commodities.

The comments in this thread began with a murky understanding of the mandate that required this action, before swerving into the simmering political side of the film language issue by assessing the intentions of the lawmakers, and generally expressing opinions about what sort of language should be used for films in Georgia. Film dubbing was thematized in this discussion in terms of “quality.” Rustaveli/Amirani’s insistence that dubbing quality had improved was contested on the thread by postings that complained extensively about Georgian dubbing, and cited examples of subpar versions. For example, in one comment response, Rustaveli/Amirani implored customers, “Georgian translation has improved, see the new films and be assured of it!”¹⁴ This was challenged by the next comment, in which a patron named

Ucha wrote, "What has improved, give me a break. . . it is better to watch those translations on MUTE. . .".¹⁵ Rather than ignoring this detractor, Rustaveli/Amirani replied at length, including the following explanation, "[. . .] the film's Georgian mix is done in Moscow, in Studio Pitagor and the final Georgian version is put together in London in Universal Studios. So, this is so that the film's sound will be technical, as well as from an artistic perspective very close to the ideal."¹⁶ What is interesting in this explanation is that to assert the quality of Georgian dubbing, Rustaveli/Amirani invoked geographic points outside Georgia (Moscow and London) as guarantors of "quality." After Georgian language dubbing, the film is physically channeled through Moscow and London. The final product, then, carries the imprint of the Georgian language, but must cycle through locations associated with professional quality before returning to Tbilisi. Thus both Rustaveli/Amirani and the commenting patrons discursively linked quality of dubbing to Moscow, and secondarily to London. In this exchange, we also see that Russian is simultaneously the film language in Georgia that must be avoided and an assurance of film-code quality.

Yet the interaction between Rustaveli/Amirani and the dissatisfied patron did not end there. Rustaveli/Amirani inquired what the last film was that Ucha saw, to which he replied "Hunger Games." Rustaveli/Amirani replied in this fashion: "'Hunger Games' was terrible, about that it is hard to disagree. But recent films that have been done are considerably better, aside from Georgian no other languages are heard and no 'sounds' are lost."¹⁷ This response conceded that Ucha's complaint was legitimate, and acknowledged technical ways in which the dubbing for "Hunger Games" was of low quality (Rustaveli/Amirani noted too many languages co-present and overlapping in the sound track, and lack of original non-dialogue sounds in the final product). This was followed up by another commenter, who inquired: "Why can't you translate like the Russians?"¹⁸ Rustaveli/Amirani responded with a repetition of their central tenet: "Our dubbing quality has improved,"¹⁹ but comment reactions indicated that customers remained skeptical. Those commenters who suggested leaving films in the original language, or in Russian, were told that this was no longer possible due to the recent law on film showings.

Ideologies about film consumption informed the choices that theaters made about audiovisual translation. For example, the perspective of a Rustaveli/Amirani manager, Mr. A., took account of production constraints, along with historical and contemporary consumption preferences. In 2012, Mr. A. acknowledged that Rustaveli movie theater had been fined for showing films in Russian. He then explained why Russian films continued to be shown, his answer neatly positing three dimensions: 1. economics,²⁰ 2. difficulty of translation (to Georgian),²¹ and 3. preference/habit for Russian.²² All three of these factors were intimately related. Saakashvili's top-down policy that sought to remove Russian language from public film showings did not address the three factors Mr. A. identified as the reasons that Russian showings continued. The law on film showings mandated the creation of a linguistic and social milieu for fashioning new kinds of subjectivities, but was severed from existing preferences, economic exigences, and the practical considerations for creating a Georgian dubbing industry.

Subtitling: Reading Is Terribly Uncomfortable

Given that subtitling is cheaper and less technically demanding than dubbing, what kinds of explanations are provided to explain the widespread disdain for subtitling in Georgia? While films dubbed in Georgian were widely criticized, subtitling elicited an even greater outcry. For dubbed films, Russian practices were taken as the successful model to which Georgian practices were compared. But for subtitling, no such framework of success was available. So while successfully dubbing was cast as desirable but unattainable, subtitling was considered undesirable both for how it altered the medium from visual to "text" and also for how it changed the role of the film consumer from passive viewer to active reader. These elements, which then-President

Saakashvili considered marks of “European” modernity, were troublesome annoyances for movie theater patrons and managers.

Mr. A., a Rustaveli/Amirani manager, described the problem with subtitles by explaining that there are two types of people: those who can read quickly, and those who cannot. Even for fast readers, Mr. A. characterized the physical process as “terribly uncomfortable”²³ because of the way one’s attention is split between reading subtitles and following the moving picture. For slow readers, this general problem was even more acute.²⁴ In Mr. A’s view, subtitling essentially jolts patrons out of passivity, which diminishes the pleasure that the experience of viewing a film supposedly grants. The movie-watching process, then, is conceptualized as one in which patrons ideally are in a state of passive reception, not coerced into the active discomfort of reading.²⁵

Within the format of subtitling there is no way to dispense with this possible displeasure associated with reading. However, Mr. A described a pair of special glasses that he had witnessed at a display fare in Las Vegas two years earlier, which, when perfected, would circumvent the “problem” of maintaining simultaneous focus on both the film and subtitles. According to Mr. A., with these glasses, one does not need to adjust the focus when moving one’s eyes from picture to subtitles: they diminish the gap between picture and subtitles by reducing the amount of work needed from the human eye. Mr. A. described this as making the process of watching a film *upro mart’ivi* (more simple). That a form of mediating technology would be of interest, even as an aside, in a conversation about subtitling practices in Georgia indicated that Rustaveli/Amirani was invested in resolving the “problem” with subtitles in a way that created a comfortable, passive viewer. When I investigated the concept of subtitling glasses further, I discovered that the only product on the market was geared towards hearing-impaired moviegoers, and projects subtitles onto special glasses for films that otherwise do not have them. Thus, Mr. A’s description of the special subtitle glasses was either for a product that has not yet been released in any capacity, or was a misunderstanding of the function of the recently created Sony Entertainment Access Glasses. In either case, Mr. A. regarded subtitles and picture as not properly integrated for *mart’ivi* (simple) viewing.²⁶

No Single Strategy for Film Translation?

In addition to being the source and standard of evaluations of “quality” in dubbing, Russian language remained a hidden intermediary for the translation of foreign films. Let’s return to the live film interpreter, Giovanni, who we left in his dining room, eating a choux pastry and reminiscing about a form of labor now gone from Tbilisi. For live interpreters like Giovanni, the work of translation was subsumed within his voicing practice. In contemporary practice, those who voice the films are not the same as those who translate them: the labor of film voicing relies on text translation. Audiovisual translation “quality,” then, falls not on a single individual, but on a distributed network, in which translation laborers’ work is voiced, but whose presence remains hidden. There was no system of Georgian translation during the Soviet period, nor any universal principles followed by translators. This is not to say that translators were unaware of the difficulty or significance of the task; rather, there was simply no centralized set of instructions or guidelines to which all translators attended. Schools of translations existed in the Soviet Union, such as the Kashkin School. Established in the 1930s, it emphasized realism in translation, particularly stressing the links between social realism and the translation process.²⁷

The lack of institutionalization of film translation practice was reflected in the oft-repeated view from those knowledgeable about the contemporary and historical practice of film translation in Georgia that translators make use of their own resources to solve the problems posed by a given film. Translation is the act of an individual language laborer rather than a collectivity. In the Georgian case, translators, most of whom are female, are poorly remunerated and easily replaced. In contrast to the

ideological nature of Russian schools of translation, most translators active in contemporary Georgia did not place ideological considerations at the forefront in their accounts of the practice of translation. Rather, translators described translation primarily as a way to make money, and as such, sought to work as efficiently and accurately as possible.

The Georgian translation industry is thus a sort of distributed apparatus supported by ad hoc processes. Translators, for example, often relied on unexpected resources, such as scripts in Russian for English-language films. According to one translator, Ms. N., it was “easier” for her to use the Russian film script as the basis for her Georgian translation of an English language film than the English language film script, especially for colloquial, slang, and conversational phrases. Like other translators, she accessed Russian-language film subtitles online in order to create and verify their English-to-Georgian versions. This hidden mediation through Russian is a way in which translators work to render “quality” products in Georgian.

Ms. N., who has done film translations for television channels Sakartvelo and Imedi, told me that each television station maintains its own pool of translators. A translator is allotted a few days to complete each assignment. From one station to another, practices varied considerably. For example, Ms. N. was given the full film to work from, but another translator reported that she was given only a written script to translate, and then was allowed to watch the content only within the television facility itself. In 2015, a student who works as a part-time translator for film subtitles told me that he is given only a written text to translate (from English to Georgian) and never sees the films. This was because releasing films to translators was considered a risk of piracy.

There was a widespread perception that Russian pirated versions of films were ubiquitous in Georgia, even allegedly appearing on television. Rustaveli/Amirani and Bravo Studios were interested in combating piracy, as it damaged the value of their products obtained through legal channels. When asked, regular consumers and those in the film industry immediately recalled shoddy pirated Russian versions of foreign films on video with memorably bad dubbing in two voices, one of which had a disagreeable nasal timbre. This duo dubbed both male and female voices with unaltered sameness. These two voices were recalled with nostalgia as representative of an era of lack. Low quality pirated Russian film-dubbers made their way into the Georgian market, and, in turn, collective memory, since official channels of film distribution were incapable of providing the breadth of new releases in a timely or affordable fashion. Thus evaluations of Georgian dubbing focus on the official, high-quality Soviet and post-Soviet dubbed versions, and leave aside the well-known low-quality, unofficial dubbed versions.

Conclusion

The birth of a new Georgian film dubbing industry and the commentaries on foreign-film language preferences that encircled it offer insights on broader concerns about the relationship between Georgia and different kinds of foreignness. Georgian film dubbing participates in the construction of a scale of inferiority, in which the attainment of “quality” remains elusively out of reach in both artistic and technical dimensions. The experience of consuming media has come to be linked with attaining, or at least closely mimicking, a kind of Euro-normative version of modernity. Passivity, which is linked to “comfort,” is taken as a dimension of the “ideal” film viewing experience—and was also a component of then-President Saakashvili’s proposed method of foreign language acquisition.

[Correction added on 9 September 2015, after online publication: ‘Evaluatory terms like “comfort” about the experience of consuming media have come to be linked with certain practices associated with attaining, or at least closely mimicking, a kind of Euro-normative version of modernity.’ was changed to ‘The experience of consuming media has come to be linked with attaining, or at least closely mimicking, a kind of Euro-normative version of modernity.’].

The medium of film dubbing is historically tethered to Russian, as a linguistic code considered appropriate to transmitting “quality.” The contested terrain of Russian dubbing in Tbilisi reveals how enduring Soviet networks of film distribution continue to leave their imprint on contemporary practices. This article has described the social and political forces that contributed to the construction of a new Georgian filming dubbing industry for an audience that largely did not want it. The Russian language was present in the process of audiovisual translation, where it was a hidden intermediary in the work of English-Georgian translators, and also as the measure of quality in the evaluative frameworks by which products were appraised. Changes in linguistic labor in audiovisual translation have depersonalized linguistic mediation. Additionally, the lack of a coherent institutional framework in Georgia for audiovisual translation has imperiled the so-called “art” of film dubbing.

Debates over language in the film industry have persistently indexed Georgia’s standing in relation to modernities of elsewhere. Movie theaters are a zone of accrual, in which Russian operates as a form of sociotechnical mediation through which “ideal” practices associated with “European” or “Western” cosmopolitanism are made available. Language practices are thought to either engender or prevent a kind of “comfortable,” effortless consumption, the sign of a preferred subjectivity. The gap between the cosmopolitan ideal of effortless consumption and Saakashvili’s promotion of English language film screenings as a pedagogical tool for the acquisition of English reinforced this scale of inferiority. That is, this case indicates a friction between cinemas functioning simultaneously as didactic domains of language acquisition and passive places of consumption. Thus both the historical saturation of Russian language presence in media forms, and its attendant valuation as inscribing “quality” to audiovisual mediation, are part of the process by which Georgian cultural difference was fashioned at both the individual and institutional levels. Despite significant changes in the way that films are linguistically and technologically mediated in Georgia, a number of factors—historical, economic, social, and technical—have militated against the transformation of Russian-imprinted linguistic practices in this zone of accrual.

Notes

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1. In the Soviet Union, the content of films was, at various points, mediated, either through selective transference, such as favoring certain actors, genres, or styles, or through censorship, by which ideological orientations were included in the presentation of foreign films. For an overview of Soviet film until 1953, see Peter Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society: From the Revolution to the Death of Stalin* (2001). For a more general view of censorship and cultural life in the Soviet Union, see the collected volume Marianna Tax Choldin and Maurice Friedberg, eds., *The Red Pencil: Artists, Scholars, and Censors in the USSR* (1989).

2. For additional historical perspective on live interpretation, see Nornes 2007.

3. To be sure, quality comparisons tell only part of the story, as “people engage with broken material things in ways that exceed considerations of comparative ‘quality’” (Lemon 2009:204).

4. The field of Audiovisual Translation (AVT) is a subdiscipline of translation studies in which the classic concerns of translation—treason, remainders, accommodations, and the limitations of transfer—are refigured or made more acute as the “text” incorporates visual dimensions (Gambier and Gottlieb 2001; Orero 2004). Another thread within this literature approaches the problems that particular forms of talk pose for audiovisual translation (for example, see Antonini 2005 on humor). Scholars working in the field of AVT tend to focus on the possibilities and

limitations of transferring denotational meaning between audiovisual “texts.” Though power dynamics and social context intervene, they are rarely the focus of analysis except insofar as they impinge on considerations for rendering the translated audiovisual text.

5. <http://www.president.gov.ge/en/Georgia/GeorgianWorldMedia/?p=6876&i=1> Governmental translation, accessed 6/12/2013

6. All Georgian translations within this article are my own, except where otherwise noted. I include the original Georgian in footnotes in an effort to render the act of translation visible (inspired, in part, by Venuti 2008 and Nornes 1999). “Vaccine on Western thought” is “*dasaolur azrovnobaze ‘avtsrat’*” in Georgian.

7. Then-President Saakashvili explained the Teach and Learn Georgian (TLG) program in this way: “Recently we have brought 3,000 young teachers from America, Australia, New Zealand, Australia. They will teach not only in the cities, but in villages as well—in every single school (we have exactly 3,000 schools and have exactly 3,000 teachers). We intend to increase this number to 4,000 next year and to 10,000 in future. This means that we will have about two or three volunteers at each school. In about five or six years everybody in Georgia will speak English.” <http://www.president.gov.ge/en/Georgia/GeorgianWorldMedia/?p=6876&i=1> Governmental translation, accessed June 12, 2013.

8. “[. . .] *p’irdap’ir dublirebaze uars vambobt—pilmeps chventan mkholod enaze daushveben kartuli subt’it’rebit, rata khalkhi ubralod sheechvios utskho enis zhgheradobas.*” <http://www.president.gov.ge/Georgia/GeorgianWorldMedia/?p=6876&i=1> accessed June 12, 2013.

9. <http://www.media.ge/en/portal/news/40562/>, accessed June 12, 2013.

10. In social media, there was some blowback to the promotion of subtitles in Georgia, including a Facebook page called “*dzirs pilmebi subt’i’trebit*” (“Down with subtitled films”), and another page called “*moashoret subt’it’rebi kartuli t’elarkhebidan*” (“Remove subtitles from Georgian television,” which had 3,575 friends in mid-2012).

11. “Some people may learn our language, but they are very few. So, it is necessary to become a part of the modern world, integrate in it. . . . We equipped every child with a computer, but what will the result be if they don’t know any other language besides Georgian?” Governmental translation, accessed June 13, 2013: <http://www.president.gov.ge/en/Georgia/GeorgianWorldMedia/?p=6876&i=1>

12. To give a sense of the monetary investment in translation made by the GPB alone, the budget for 2010 allocated 246.5 thousand GEL (roughly \$150,000) and the 2011 budget allocated 187.4 GEL (roughly \$113,000) for translating and dubbing. GPB year-end summaries, including finances, are available online at <http://www.gpb.ge/Reports.aspx?Location=&LangID=1>, accessed November 7, 2013.

13. Koolstra et al. (2002) point out that dubbing techniques or strategies vary by country. For example, in Germany there is a greater effort to match the dubbing text to the lip-movements of the speaker than in Italy (based on Luyken et al. 1991). This is termed the “lip synchronicity” problem, for which solutions vary considerably (Koolstra et al. 2002:338). Preferences for dubbing or subtitling are reflective of what mode of translation has become the norm for a given country (Koolstra et al. 2002; Luyken et al. 1991).

14. This first comment reads: “*kartuli targmani gaumjobesda, nakhet akhali pilmebi da darts’mundebit amashi!*”

15. “*ra gaumjobesda k’argi ra.. jobia MUTE ze uq’uro eget targmnils..|*” Note that Ucha’s response uses the Georgian font except for the English word MUTE, which indexes the remote control button he suggests would best be pressed while viewing these translations. Ucha says “MUTE ze”, combining the English “MUTE” with the Georgian postposition *-ze*, which means “on.”

16. “[. . .] *pilmis kartuli miksi k’etdeba mosk’ovshi, st’udia pitagorshi da sabolo kartuli versii ats’qoba khdeba londonshi unioversalis st’udiashi. ase, rom pilmis gakhmovaneba ikneba rogoris t’eknik’uri, aseve mkhat’oruli tvasazrisit dzalian akhlos idealurtan.*”

17. “*shimshilis tamashebi sashineleba iq’o, amashi dznelia ar dagetankhmot. magram bolo pilmebi rats gak’etda, aris gatsilebit uk’etesad gak’etebuli, kartulis garda artserti skhva ena ar ismis da arts’shumebi’ dak’argula*” Note the use of the word *shumebi*. This is the Russian word *shum* (noise) with the Georgian suffix for pluralization of nouns, *-ebi*.

18. “*rusebiviit rato ver targmnit?*” Note the clipped, conversational tone in which the final *-m* is dropped from *ratom* (“why”).

19. “*chveni gakhmovanebi khariskhi gaumjobesda*” Here *chveni* (“our”) refers to Rustaveli/Amirani’s film showing practices, but as they are a virtual monopoly in the market, may also be read as indexical of Georgian film showings more generally. In other words, *chveni* may stand for either the business collective or the national unit.

20. "kharjebis shemtsirebisatvis" ("for the reduction of costs")
21. "pilmebi dzalian dzneli satargmnia" ("films are really hard to translate")
22. "gverchivna rom gvechvnebina rusulad" ("we preferred that we showed in Russian")
23. "sashinelad arak'omport'uli aris"
24. "isini vints sts'rapad ver kitkhuloben matvois prost'a azri ara akvs subt'it'rebs" ("Those who are unable to read quickly, for them subtitles just have no point"). Note the use of the Russian word *prосто* (just, simply).
25. Rationalizations for preferring dubbing call up the typical complaints about subtitling, such as the aesthetically displeasing results of text-on-image and the practical difficulties of simultaneously reading and watching a film. Yet some explanations run deeper, describing more widespread "Georgian" preferences. For example, a member of the Georgian National Film Center (GNFC) told me that he thought subtitles were unpopular in Georgia because reading itself is unpopular ("We don't like to read"). He commented that when one walks around the streets in Georgia, one doesn't see people reading newspapers or magazines, unlike in Turkey, he said, where everyone is reading. His explanation was that that reading itself (not words mixed with pictures) is the unappealing thing for a Georgian audience. This contrasts with Mr. A.'s claim that the dispreference of subtitling, its "terrible discomfort," derives from reading and watching simultaneously.
26. Setting viewer preferences aside, there is no evidence that reading subtitles requires burdensome information processing allocations. According to Koolstra et al. (2002), Gielen (1988) has demonstrated in an eye-tracking study that viewers use a strategy of looking just above the subtitled text during a film viewing in order to process the image and text together continuously. This study showed that viewers processed subtitles efficiently. The literature about the psychological effects and consequences of subtitling and dubbing, which has focused specifically on issues of attention and comprehension, is beyond the scope of this article (see Wissmath et al. 2009; Yetka 2010). There have been no such studies on Georgian.
27. Samantha Sherry, personal correspondence, November 13, 2011.

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